



Writing Unseen
Commentaries: A Student
Help Book

Writing Unseen Commentaries: A Student Help Book

STUDENT EDITION

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The Answers Booklet (if it is attached) can be found after Page 174.

The Purpose of this Book

It's designed to help you write good commentaries on short pieces of literature.

You will have already had to do some writing about poems and prose extracts (possibly as part of a **GCSE** or **IGCSE** or **MYP** or Junior High course); but now you're following a more advanced English programme (**GCE Advanced Level**, **International Baccalaureate**, **Advanced Placement** or something similar) and you're perhaps not quite sure what will be expected of you when you come to the final examination.

The exam is likely to include a section in which you are asked to discuss a piece of writing you have not seen before – an Unprepared or Unseen Commentary section (two of the three Free-Response Essays are the **AP** equivalent). You'll be presented with some poetry and a page or so of prose. (What's prose? Anything that's not poetry.) You'll be expected to comment on at least one passage in detail, with or without the help of guiding questions. That's a challenge, since you'll be working so much in the dark: you may well not have even heard of the writer. If the extract is from a narrative work (a novel or a play) you won't know, either, what's happened earlier in the story.

So some very special skills are involved; but as you'll see they're easy to develop at a basic level...then it's up to you to decide how far you want to refine them.

They aren't just writing skills. You will have to learn to read in a new way, and to notice new things *as* you read. That's the first thing this book will help you with. How to make notes is another. The writing will come later.

If your course covers two years, it doesn't matter if you're in its first or second year:

- o If you're just setting out on it then working steadily through this book will help you develop your commentary skills gradually and effectively, and those skills will in turn be of enormous help as you study your main literature texts.
- o If on the other hand your final exams are fast approaching there's still time to learn some new strategies for coping with the Commentary part of them. The important thing is that when you go into the exam room you should be confident that you can make at least a sound attempt at understanding, then writing about, a prose passage or poem you will be reading for the first time. You should feel positive about the prospect, in fact...this is one part of the exam where what you *know* is less important than what you can *do*.

To make the book easier to use it's broken up into manageable units separated by a wavy line:



Try to get through each unit at one sitting, or at least over the course of one day. That will help you hold the focus of the unit in your mind. Review each one (by skimming through it once more) before you begin the next one.

Feel free, of course, to draw your own wavy line whenever you've had enough for the moment...

The Answers

No answers to the questions are given in this edition of the Help Book. They are instead published separately in the 'Help Book Answers' booklet, which your teacher may make available to you so that you can check your own responses.

Remember, however that all answers to important questions about literature are open to further debate, and that there is rarely a single 'right' answer. What is more important than being right is developing your responses using the best possible techniques. This book is largely about good techniques for commenting, in an exam situation, on short pieces of writing you have not seen before.

It's quite possible, also, that some of your answers may turn out to be sounder or more perceptive than those we have suggested in the booklet. If that's the case...well done (and we'd like to hear about them).

A Note for IB Higher Level Candidates

Don't move straight to the Higher Level passages (Section Two): it's important that you work your way through Section One first, even though you may find you can do so quite quickly.

A Note for Advanced Placement Candidates

The passages you are given in the AP exam will have single essay questions attached to them. You will find a separate list of typical questions (relating to the passages we have worked on) in Section Seven. The skills you have acquired or developed as you work through the book will be very relevant to what you are asked to do in the Free-Response part of the exam.

A Note for GCE Advanced Level Candidates

Different examining boards set different types of question. All of the passages in this book, however, and all of the work you will do on them, will help you strengthen your analytical and critical skills; but be sure to look closely at some past papers set by your own A Level board. That will help you narrow your focus and allow you to practise writing commentaries in the correct format.

Writing Unseen Commentaries

Introductory Passages

Things People Do In Front Of Other People

Think of any human activity that involves an audience or spectators – say a soccer match. If we wanted to analyse the match (break it down into its parts) we could do so in different ways, depending on whether we were writing a newspaper report about it, trying to decide whether it had been worth watching, working out why one side rather than the other had won, using it as an illustration of what a ‘good’ game of soccer is like, and so on.

Here’s one way of breaking such an activity down so that we can think about it in an organised way.

- o Where and when did it take place? (*Was the pitch in good shape? What was the weather like? Did the venue favour one side? What had been written in the sporting press before the match?*) We could call that the **Setting** for the event.
- o Who took part? (*The players, and the referee...and the spectators too if their behaviour had an impact on what was happening on the pitch.*) They are the people – **Characters** – involved.
- o What happened? (*The story of the game, with as much detail as needed.*) That’s the **Action**.
- o How did it all happen? (*An overview of the way the game was played by each team.*) We might call that the **Style** of what went on.
- o What conclusions can we draw from all of the above? (*Can we now explain why the winners won? What did we learn from the match about what makes a winning side or a good game, or about football itself as a sport?*) These are the **Ideas** we take away with us at the end.

That may seem at first sight to be a rather clumsy framework...and sorry if you aren’t at all interested in soccer. Try substituting a rock concert, a political meeting, an English lesson, a bank robbery...

Then try a novel or a play. That will take us closer to where we’re going next – a short discussion about how we can analyse literature. We can then set about exploring ways of doing so effectively, particularly when the literature is chopped up into the small bits called ‘Passages for Commentary’.

Novels and Plays – and Poems As Well

It’s easy to see that novels and plays can be analysed under the same five headings. They tell stories after all, and stories involve action, which has to happen somewhere and usually includes people...and stories make us think.

What about **Style**, however? You maybe felt that category didn’t work too well for soccer etc. Well it works rather better for literature, since most stories are told in words; and language has a whole range of identifiable styles. (There are other kinds of style in literature: novels have a narrative style, and when

you're studying plays you'll come across the phrase 'dramatic style', which refers to what makes a particular play distinctive as a piece of theatre.)

Do all five headings work for poetry?

Narrative poetry presents no problem, since it tells stories (with characters, action and so on). What about 'ordinary' poems, however, like most of those you've studied so far in school? We'll need to consider how far they can be said to have a setting, or characters, or an action – and that will vary from poem to poem.

The framework we've outlined above can be very useful to you when you come to write about a poem or a prose extract, or a short passage from a play. It can also be very helpful when you're studying a whole work of literature, particularly when you're preparing it for an exam...and it's an excellent way of organising your notes.

So see (without looking back) if you can remember the five headings. Think about the soccer match...or the bank robbery. Here's a start:

Se...

Ch...

There you are – you already have a valuable tool at your disposal. Now you need to practise using it.

How You Can Do That

We'll look at some pieces of writing, both prose and poetry, to see what part is played in them by each of the five elements we've identified (*SCASI* may help you remember them, if you had trouble doing so a moment ago).

Section One contains five pairs of extracts – one prose passage and one poem in each case. The discussion on the passages in each pair focuses on one of the five *SCASI* elements. Other features of each passage are noted as well, so that by the time you've worked through the first pair, for instance, you will have a much clearer idea of how *Setting* can help a writer achieve his purpose, in both prose and poetry, but you'll also have had some practice in picking out examples of the other four elements.

That may be enough for you, if you're short of time because the exams are close, or English isn't one of your 'strong' subjects, or you're studying it at **Standard Level** rather than **Higher Level**. So you may feel ready to go straight to the independent practice passages (Section Three).

If however you want to take things further you can work through Section Two (**Higher Level** passages). If you're an **A Level** or **Advanced Placement** student you should certainly try those as well.

What's the difference between **IB Standard Level** and **Higher Level** commentary questions? Not a great deal. **Higher Level** passages tend to be longer and more complex (so candidates are allowed more time to write about them); and you'll often have to do some hard thinking to establish just what's going on in each case; and they don't have guiding questions; and **Higher Level** candidates are expected to pay more attention to that difficult thing *Style*. But they're generally unusual and powerful pieces of writing and you should find working with them interesting as well as challenging.

If you're studying **A Level** or following an **Advanced Placement** course, you'll find that the passages we have chosen are very similar to those you'll meet in your own examination, and the skills you'll need to analyse them are just the same. The passages in Section Three (Passages for Further Practice) come from a variety of sources, and we'll help you to relate them to your own exam.

To Get Us Started – a General Example

Let's begin by taking one passage and examining briefly how each of its five aspects (*Setting, Character, Action*...can you add the other two?) is reflected in its detail.

First Step: read the passage (on the next page). It's something of an adventure story. If you don't feel you've altogether understood it, read it again. It's quite normal to have to do that.

PASSAGE 1

'Foreigners are not very popular here,' Mr Butler told me at breakfast. 'So I don't think you ought to go out alone.'

My heart sank. I hated to be dependent on other people. They would never want to do what I wanted to do. I began to feel imprisoned. I took up the moth-eaten balls and the
5 old tennis racket which were lying in the hall, and went into the garden.

I hit the balls fiercely against the stable doors until I was too hot and unhappy to go on. I sat brooding on the steps. I might have been in Sydenham for all I could see – a European villa and a line of poplars; yet outside lay a Chinese city which I was longing to explore.

After lunch I decided that I could stand it no longer. Mr Butler and Mr Roote were still
10 deep in their morning's discussion, so I let myself quickly out of the back gate and walked along the sandy lane which led into the country. Mr Butler could not mind my walking in the country, I thought.

Everything was still and silent, in an early-afternoon torpor. The only sound came from the stunted bushes which squeaked and grated linguistically as the wind passed through
15 them. Pillars and scarves of dust and sand rose up from the ground, eddying and swirling themselves into flat sheets which hovered in the air. Harsh spears of grass stuck up through the sand. The soles of my shoes began to burn and I looked round vainly for some shady place. I enjoyed the dreamlike stillness and wanted to stay out for as long as possible. I thought that if I walked on I might find a place. The road led towards the hills.
20 Across the sandy plain the city walls stood up like cliffs. Turrets and bastions were ruined cottages, crumbling into the sea.

I walked on, fixing my eyes on a black speck some way in front of me. I wondered if it could be a cat crouching in the middle of the road; or perhaps it was a dark boulder.

As I drew nearer, a haze of flies suddenly lifted, and I saw that the object was not black
25 but pink. The loathsome flies hovered angrily above it, buzzing like dynamos. I bent my head down to see what it was. I stared at it stupidly until my numbed senses suddenly awoke again. Then I jumped back, my throat quite dry and my stomach churning.

The thing was a human head. The nose and eyes had been eaten away and the black hair was caked and grey with dust. Odd white teeth stood up like ninepins in its dark, gaping
30 mouth. Its cheeks and shrivelled lips were plastered black with dried blood, and I saw long coarse hairs growing out of its ears.

Because it was so terrible, my eyes had to return to it whenever I looked away. I stared into its raw eye-sockets until waves of sickness spread over me. Then I ran. The whole plain and the bare hills had suddenly become tinged with horror.

35 I found myself between high banks. I would soon be coming to a village. There were signs of cultivation. When the first cur barked, I turned and ran back the way I had come. I did not know what to do. I would have to pass the head again.

I tried to avoid it by making for the city walls across the pathless sand. My feet sank in, and my shoes became full and heavy. My only idea was to get back to the house.

40 Tall rank grass grew in the shadow of the wall. It was dry and sharp as knives. I pushed through it, looking up at the towering cliff for a gate or steps to climb. Nothing else seemed to be alive except the insects. I could only hear their buzzing and the slap of them when they hit the wall.

There was no gate. I began to feel desperate. I ran towards a bastion, wondering if I
45 could climb up to it in any way. I knew that I could not.

Denton Welch, *Maiden Voyage* (1943)

Second Step: Make brief notes in response to the following questions. After each set of questions you can look at the boxed section to see how well you have done (but don't be concerned if you seem at times to have failed miserably: you've just started the course, after all).

1. *Setting*

- a) 4-5 What does the condition of the tennis balls and the tennis racquet tell us about the place the boy is staying in?
- b) 8 Poplar trees are tall and thin and are usually planted in straight lines. How does that make them an appropriate choice (by the writer) as part of the scenery? (Sydenham is a London suburb.)
- c) 41-42 What is there about the grass as described in these lines which adds to the boy's fear? Can you see a connection with *line 17*?
- d) 43-44 What effect on the atmosphere of the passage does this second mention of insects have?

(See Box 1 in the Answers Booklet)

2. *Character*

- a) 3-4 '*I hated to be dependent on other people. They would never want to do what I wanted to do.*' Which of these two sentences reveals more about the boy's character?
- b) 6-9 Which two words in this paragraph might lead us to describe the boy as spoilt?
- c) 10-13 In the last sentence of this paragraph the boy tries to persuade himself that he is not doing anything wrong. Which word earlier in the paragraph shows that he does in fact know that he should not be going off by himself?

(See Box 2 in the Answers Booklet)

3. Action

- a) What elements of conflict – things likely to force a development in the situation – are present in the opening four paragraphs (*lines 1-13*)?
- b) *23-28* How does the writer build up suspense for the reader?

(See Box 3 in the Answers Booklet)

4. Style

- a) *14-18* What details in the writer's description of the landscape indicate that it has a life of its own, and that it is rather threatening?
- b) *35* The phrase '*tinged with horror*' suggests that in the boy's eyes even theof the scenery has changed.
- c) *36-38* What is there about these sentences that emphasises the boy's panic?

(See Box 4 in the Answers Booklet)

5. Ideas

Which of the following ideas underlie this piece of narrative?

- o Adolescent rebelliousness
- o Rationalisation (finding 'reasons' to support questionable behaviour)
- o The gap between cultures
- o The unexpectedness of things

(See Box 5 in the Answers Booklet)

If some of the details we've picked out under each of the headings have struck you as obvious – good! When you're writing a commentary you must be prepared to mention the straightforward things (straightforwardly) as well as the more subtle ones. Don't try to be *clever* until you've been *sound*.

Now we can repeat the process for a poem, in order to demonstrate that the *I-5* framework can be applied equally well to poetry. (If your experience with poetry up till now has not been good, let's hope it's about to get better. You may have a choice between a poetry and a prose passage, but you can't afford to say at this stage, 'I won't answer the poetry question.' You may have to.)

This section shouldn't take you much more than half an hour; but beware: the poem is not an easy one.

PASSAGE 2

Testing the Reality

I could count to a ragged 20 but no higher.
The flocking birds she taught me numbers by
so crammed church roof and belfry, cross and spire
their final taking off blacked Beeston's¹ sky.

- 5 There must have been 10,000 there or more.
They picketed piercingly the passing of each day
and shrilly hailed the first new light they saw
and hour after hour their numbers grew
till, on a Sunday morning, they all flew away
10 as suddenly as her 70 years would do.

- The day that fledged her with the wings of night
made all her days flock to it, and as one
beyond all sight, all hearing, taste, smell, touch,
they soared away and, soaring, blocked the light
15 of what they steered their course by from her son,
the last soul still unhatched left in the clutch.

Tony Harrison, from *The School of Eloquence* (1978)

¹Beeston: a city suburb in Northern England

1. Setting

- a) Why do you think the poet has chosen this one building in Beeston, a church, as the setting for his poem?
- b) What details in the poem take us beyond Beeston and into a wider setting?

- c) How are we brought back to the narrower setting (the church) at the end of the poem?

(See Box 6 in the Answers Booklet)

2. Character

- a) *1-2* How does the poet suggest the age of the poet when this first event (the flying away of the birds) occurred?
- b) *14-16* What do we learn in these lines about the poet's feelings at the death of his mother?

(See Box 7 in the Answers Booklet)

3. Action

- a) Two events are described in the poem. How are they connected?
- b) How much time separates the events?

(See Box 8 in the Answers Booklet)

4. Style

- a) How does the poet convey the idea that the number of birds was very high?
- b) *Lines 13* and *16* are connected by their rhyme. How does that emphasise the feelings you identified in your answer to *2b*?

(See Box 9 in the Answers Booklet)

5. *Ideas*

Try to suggest in a short phrase of your own what the poem is 'about'.

(See Box 10 in the Answers Booklet)

When we break writing down into its parts it's easy to lose sight of the whole piece. Once you've taken the passage apart (and answered any questions you have been asked) it's always worth noting, in a sentence or two, what's special about it, overall, and what its final effect has been. You can do this as a conclusion to your commentary, even if you haven't been told to round off your responses in such a way. A suitable final note on this poem might be:

At the end of the poem we are left with the touching picture of a little boy watching a flock of birds fly away and, superimposed on that, the image of the same person in his later years remembering the death of his mother – like a photographic double exposure.

We'll ask you to perform a similar exercise with some of the other passages we shall be studying.

We can now proceed to Section One, and the first set of paired passages. Each pair focuses on one of the five elements and discusses the concept itself (*Setting* and so on) in much more detail.



Section One: Standard Level Passages

Part 1: A Focus on Setting

Read the next passage carefully and work through the questions on *Setting* first of all.

PASSAGE 3

Our house is high up on the Yorkshire coast, and close by the sea. We have got beautiful walks all round us, in every direction but one. That one I acknowledge to be a horrid walk. It leads, for a quarter of a mile, through a melancholy plantation of firs, and brings you out between low cliffs on the loneliest and ugliest little bay on all our coast.

5 The sand-hills here run down to the sea, and end in two spits of rock jutting out opposite each other, till you lose sight of them in the water. One is called the North Spit, and one the South. Between the two, shifting backwards and forwards at certain seasons of the year, lies the most horrible quicksand on the shores of Yorkshire. At the turn of the tide, something goes on in the unknown deeps below, which sets the whole face of the quicksand shivering and trembling in a manner most remarkable to see, and which has given to it, among the people in our parts, the name of
10 The Shivering Sand. A great bank, half a mile out, nigh the mouth of the bay, breaks the force of the main ocean coming in from the offing¹. Winter and summer, when the tide flows over the quicksand, the sea seems to leave the waves behind it on the bank, and rolls its waters in smoothly with a heave, and covers the sand in silence. A lonesome and horrid retreat, I can tell you! No boat ever ventures
15 into this bay. No children from our fishing-village, called Cobb's Hole, ever come here to play. The very birds of the air, as it seems to me, give the Shivering Sand a wide berth. That a young woman, with dozens of nice walks to choose from, and company to go with her, if she only said 'Come!' should prefer this place, and should sit and work² or read in it, all alone, when it's her turn out, I grant you, passes belief. It's true, nevertheless, account for it as you may, that this was Rosanna
20 Spearman's favourite walk, except when she went once or twice to Cobb's Hole, to see the only friend she had in our neighbourhood, of whom more anon. It's also true that I was now setting out for this same place, to fetch the girl in to dinner, which brings us round happily to our former point, and starts us fair again on our way to the sands.

I saw no sign of the girl in the plantation. When I got out, through the sand-hills, onto the beach,
25 there she was in her little straw bonnet, and her plain grey cloak that she always wore to hide her deformed shoulder as much as might be – there she was, all alone, looking out on the quicksand and the sea.

She started when I came up with her, and turned her head away from me. Not looking me in the face being another of the proceedings which, as head of the servants, I never allow, on principle, to
30 pass without inquiry – I turned her round my way, and saw that she was crying. My bandanna handkerchief – one of six beauties given me by my lady – was handy in my pocket. I took it out, and I said to Rosanna, 'Come and sit down, my dear, on the slope of the beach along, with me. I'll dry your eyes. I'll dry your eyes for you first, and then I'll make so bold as to ask what you have been crying about.'

35 When you come to my age, you will find sitting down on the slope of a beach a much longer job than you think it now. By the time I was settled, Rosanna had dried her own eyes with a very inferior handkerchief to mine – cheap cambric. She looked very quiet, and very wretched; but she sat down by me like a good girl, when I told her. When you want to comfort a woman by the shortest way, take her on your knee. I thought of this golden rule. But there! Rosanna wasn't Nancy, and that's the truth
40 of it!

‘Now, tell me, my dear,’ I said, what are you crying about?’

‘About the years that are gone, Mr Betteredge,’ says Rosanna quietly. ‘My past life still comes back to me sometimes.’

‘Come, come, my good girl,’ I said, ‘your past life is all sponged out. Why can’t you forget it?’

45 She took me by one of the lappets³ of my coat. I am a slovenly old man, and a good deal of my meat and drink gets splashed on my clothes. Sometimes one of the women, and sometimes another, cleans me of my grease. The day before, Rosanna had taken out a spot for me on the lappet of my coat, with a new composition, warranted to remove anything. The grease was gone, but there was a little dull place left on the nap of the cloth where the grease had been. The girl pointed to that place

50 and shook her head.

‘The stain is taken off,’ she said. ‘But the place shows, Mr Betteredge – the place shows!’

from Wilkie Collins *The Moonstone* (1868)

¹ the offing: an offshore point

² work: do needlework or something similar

³ lappets: lapels

1. Setting

Here’s a bit of additional theory to begin with. The **Setting** of an event or story can be more than just ‘the place where it happens’ – the physical location. Here are some other types of setting:

- o Historical setting (when it happens)
- o Social setting (how people live in that place and at that time)
- o Political setting (how society at large is organised and controlled)
- o Philosophical setting (what ideas about life people in the community, or the writer, have)
- o Moral setting (what the people of that time and place think of as ‘right’ and ‘wrong’)
- o Economic setting (how the characters make a living, and what larger financial forces operate)

In this passage we can identify two or three prominent kinds of setting – physical, and social/economic (it’s sometimes difficult to separate those two). Our questions will deal with each in turn...and then we’ll look at the relationship between them, because that’s very important here.

Physical Setting

The short opening paragraph establishes that this part of the coast, overall, is but that the particular bay where this episode is going to take place is.....

(See Box 11 in the Answers Booklet)

List the other characteristics of the bay.

(See Box 12 in the Answers Booklet)

Social and Economic Setting

What job does Rosanna Spearman have?

(See Box 13 in the Answers Booklet)

What else do we learn about her job or about the place where she does it?

(See Box 14 in the Answers Booklet)

Can you see any connections between the two settings (physical and social)?

Probably not! It's the *contrast* between them which is in fact important. Can you see why?

(See Box 15 in the Answers Booklet)

That can lead us to another conclusion: that there are parallels between Rosanna's character and the bay as it is described. (Where a person chooses to spend his or her time can tell us something about them; so the physical setting of the piece is one key to an understanding of Rosanna and her situation.)

Can you list the parallels?

(See Box 16 in the Answers Booklet)

Bay	Rosanna

You will have noticed just how much there is to say about **Setting** in this passage, and how it ties in with other things of interest (Rosanna's character). The setting of a story isn't just a flat backcloth on a stage, which covers the wall behind the actors and gives the audience something to look at when nothing much is happening. Characters interact with the setting; the setting can influence the action; the way the setting is described can be an important feature of the style; and a writer's ideas may centre more around the location of his story than around anything else.

Sometimes, also, a writer will give us a sense of a wider context, a more universal setting, one which may include us and from which he can draw down our attention to the events in hand. That's an important way in which a writer leads us into his story. Wilkie Collins, for instance, mentions the broad geography of '*the Yorkshire coast*' (1) and '*the shores of Yorkshire*' (8). Can you find any other references in the passage to this 'wider context' (either physical or social) in which normal life goes on?

(See Box 17 in the Answers Booklet)

Guiding Questions

IB Standard Level passages (and Unprepared or Unseen Commentary passages in other exams) have guiding questions attached to them, and you won't be simply let loose to write about anything which catches your eye (although some examiners will invite you to write about whatever else that interests you, when you've answered their questions).

Usually a guiding question will direct your attention to one of the principal features of the passage. In this case, for instance, one of the questions might well be:

'What contribution does the detailed description of the story's setting make to our understanding of Rosanna's character and situation?'

You could answer that!

If there are no guiding questions, of course, then you'll be free to select from all of the things you notice about a passage in order to show the examiner that you can read perceptively and make sound judgements about how a piece of writing works.

In either case you need lots of practice in spotting significant detail. Reading a passage in a systematic way (like the one we're suggesting) will help you do that. So here are some brief notes about the remaining four aspects of the passage from *The Moonstone* before we move on to consider how setting can work in a poem.

Character

According to Mr Betteredge, Rosanna Spearman could easily have had company on her walks, if she had so chosen, and this suggests that she has friends. Something else he says, however, contradicts that notion. What is it?

(See Box 18 in the Answers Booklet)

Action

Another thing we noted in our discussion, in Section One, of the passage’s setting was the narrowing of focus on place at the beginning: the storyteller moves from the broad to the particular (*‘Yorkshire coast...sea... walks...That one’*). Can you find another example of narrowing of focus, this time on something other than place?

(See Box 19 in the Answers Booklet)

Style

What, in the opening paragraph, makes the description intimate (personal)?

(See Box 20 in the Answers Booklet)

Ideas

Life, like nature, can be both..... and.....

(See Box 21 in the Answers Booklet)

There’s a lot more to say about this passage of course. Part of the reason for that is that the passage is quite long, and quite closely textured (i.e. there’s a lot of significant detail in it).

Well...that in turn is partly because it’s an **IB High Level**, not a **Standard Level**, passage.

We aren’t playing tricks on you. This piece of writing happens to be a particularly good illustration of how important **Setting** can be, and we chose it for that reason. It should also, however, reassure you that there’s nothing to be afraid of in **Higher Level** passages, nor indeed in passages written a long time ago.

Because there's so much to note in the extract, we've discussed it again in Section Two, Higher Level Passages (page 77).

Don't Lose Sight of the Wood

Even if you're tied down to narrow guiding questions, you need to stand back at some point and ask some rather larger ones about the passage. The examiner may in fact require you to do just that, may invite you for instance to 'Show how features of the story's setting help the writer achieve his purpose.'

That will mean you have to gain some sense of what the writer is trying to do (within what may be his overall purpose in the whole book, e.g. 'tell a good story'). Another way of broadening your view would be to identify the passage's essential features – the things that make it special, or different from other pieces of writing, or particularly powerful so that it has affected you in some way. (You may well be asked to explain the impact the passage has had on you as a reader.)

So what has been really special about the pieces of writing we've looked at so far?

Maiden Voyage (page 4): The drama and intensity of the boy's experience, conveyed mainly through the passage's descriptive detail, as his feelings move from resentment through rebelliousness to fascination then horror and panic.

Testing the Reality (page 7): How by means of an extended comparison between two apparently different things, one of them described in strongly visual terms, the poet conveys the feeling of being 'left behind' when someone we love dies.

The Moonstone (page 10): How the writer communicates, through a perceptive and sympathetic narrator, a young woman's sense of being trapped in sorrow and guilt about something she has done earlier in her life.

You may have different ideas about the impact the passages have had on you. That's well and good.



Now it's time to look at another poem, in order to reinforce and develop some of the things we've said about **Setting**.

PASSAGE 4

My Father's Garden

On his way to the open hearth where white-hot steel
Boiled against the furnace walls in wait for his lance
To pierce the fireclay and set loose demons
And dragons in molten tons, blazing
5 Down to the huge satanic cauldrons,
Each day he would pass the scrapyards, his kind of garden.

In rusty rockeries of stoves and brake drums,
In grottoes of sewing machines and refrigerators,
He would pick flowers for us: small gears and cogwheels
10 With teeth like petals, with holes for anthers,
Long stalks of lead to be poured into tin soldiers,
Ball bearings as big as grapes to knock them down.

He was called a melter. He tried to keep his brain
From melting in those tiger-mouthed mills
15 Where the same steel reappeared over and over
To be reborn in the fire as something better
Or worse: cannons or cars, needles or girders,
Flagpoles, swords, or plowshares.

But it melted. His classical learning ran
20 Down and away from him, not burning bright.
His fingers culled a few cold scraps of Latin
And Greek, magna sine laude¹, for crosswords
And brought home lumps of tin and sewer grills
As if they were his ripe prize vegetables.

David Wagoner, *Landfall* (1991)

¹ magna sine laude: without great praise – the opposite of 'magna cum laude' meaning 'with great praise', a term used to signify high academic honours.

1. Setting:

This time, instead of answering a set of questions:

1. Read the poem as many times as you need to in order to grasp its overall sense as well as the meaning of most of the individual lines, words and phrases.

2. Underline or highlight all the lines, words and phrases that suggest something about the poem's setting. You'll find it's a double setting, in fact – the place where the poet's father worked, and the scrapyards he stopped at on his way there each day. You may want to use different colours for the two different places.

When you've noted those details of the setting for yourself, you'll be in a position to answer more general questions like the following:

- a) What differences do you notice between the two places the poem describes?
- b) What effect does each place have on the poet's father?

You'll find that if you answer both questions well you are in fact saying, indirectly, useful things about several of the poem's other important features – writing about the kind of man the poet's father is, explaining what happens in the poem, noting aspects of its style and even moving towards a conclusion as to what it is about. That's how fundamental setting can be, even in a poem.

(See Box 22 in the Answers Booklet)

We may, when we come to *Ideas*, decide that this poem is about the ugliness of industrialisation; the power of the creative instinct; how beauty can be found in unlikely places; or the pathos of Man's struggle to retain some dignity in the harsh world he has created.

Whatever you decide the central idea of the poem is, you'll probably find that it's firmly based in the two places described. Once again, then, setting can be crucial to a piece of writing.



Here are some questions and notes on the other aspects of the poem, to keep us in touch with the *SCASI* structure.

2. Character

What details in the poem suggest that the poet feels the following towards, or about, his father:

- a) Admiration
- b) Gratitude
- c) Sorrow?

(See Box 23 in the Answers Booklet)

3. Action

Has the poet's father died? Lost his mind? Does it matter that we don't know for certain?

(See Box 24 in the Answers Booklet)

4. Style

Select one comparison from the poem and discuss its meaning and effect. Here's an example:

'Lumps of tin and sewer grills' like 'ripe prize vegetables'

The things the poet's father brought home were different shapes and sizes, even colours, but they were all excellent in their own way (*'prize'*); they had all been brought home at just the right time (*'ripe'*); and all helped feed the children's imagination. The effect of the comparison is to show how proud the poet's father was of his gifts and to reveal more of what the poet feels towards *him* (admiration etc – or pity, perhaps?)

5. Ideas

Look back at the ideas of the poem as we listed them at the end of the section on *Setting* (page 17). Which of those ideas most closely matches your own understanding of what the poem is about? (There's no single right answer!)

In addition, think about these tricky questions:

- o Is there some irony in the fact that the objects the father brings home from the scrapyards are just the sort of things he has helped create (so unsatisfyingly) in the mill?
- o Cannons and swords are among the things produced with steel from the mill. The poet when he was a boy played with tin soldiers made with lead from the scrapyards and used *'ball bearings as big as grapes to knock them down'*. What's the significance of that war imagery?

Your answers to those two questions may cause you to think again about what the poem is about – sorry to complicate things!

Don't Lose Sight of the Wood

What's special about this poem?

(See Box 25 in the Answers Booklet)

A Note on the Side: Comparing two pieces of writing

You're likely to have noticed some similarities between this poem and *Testing the Reality* (page 7). If the examination you are preparing for (AP, for example, and some A Level exams) will require you to compare two pieces of writing on similar subjects, you could use these two poems as practice. If you think you will need help with that – it's quite a complex business – wait until we deal with some of the techniques in Section Four. (IB students can ignore all of that.)

You'll find further ideas about, and practice on, *Setting* in Section One Part 6: Analysis of further passages from SL papers (page 57).

Part 2: A Focus on Character

PASSAGE 5

‘I don’t think I will sign them.’

‘Why not sign them? You can’t really suppose that the property is your own. You could not even get it if you did think so.’

5 ‘I don’t know how that may be; but I had rather not sign them. If I am to be married, I ought not to sign anything except what he tells me.’

‘He has no authority over you yet. I have authority over you. Marie, do not give more trouble. I am very much pressed for time. Let me call in Mr Croll.’

‘No, papa,’ she said.

10 Then came across his brow that look which had probably first induced Marie to declare that she would endure to be ‘cut to pieces’, rather than to yield in this or that direction. The lower jaw squared itself, and the teeth became set, and the nostrils of his nose became extended, – and Marie began to prepare herself to be ‘cut to pieces’. But he reminded himself that there was another game which he had proposed to play before he resorted to anger and violence. He would tell her how much depended on her compliance. Therefore he relaxed the frown, – as well as he
15 knew how, and softened his face towards her, and turned again to his work. ‘I am sure, Marie, that you will not refuse to do this when I explain to you its importance to me. I must have that property for use in the city¹ tomorrow, or – I shall be ruined.’ The statement was very short, but the manner in which he made it was not without effect.

‘Oh!’ shrieked his wife.

20 ‘It is true. These harpies have so beset me about the election that they have lowered the price of every stock in which I am concerned, and have brought the Mexican Railway so low that they cannot be sold at all. I don’t like bringing my troubles home from the city; but on this occasion I cannot help it. The sum locked up here is very large, and I am compelled to use it. In point of fact it is necessary to save us from destruction.’ This he said, very slowly and with the utmost
25 solemnity.

‘But you told me just now you wanted it because I was going to be married,’ rejoined Marie.

A liar has many points to his favour, – but he has this against him, that unless he devote more time to the management of his lies than life will generally allow, he cannot make them tally. Melmotte was thrown back for a moment, and almost felt that the time for violence had come.

30 He longed to be at her that he might shake the wickedness, and the folly, and the ingratitude out of her. But he once more condescended to argue and to explain. ‘I think you misunderstood me, Marie. I meant you to understand that settlements must be made, and that of course I must get my own property back into my own hands before anything of that kind can be done. I tell you once more, my dear, that if you do not do as I bid you, so that I may use that property the first
35 thing tomorrow, we are all ruined. Everything will be gone.’

‘This can’t be gone,’ said Marie, nodding her head at the papers.

‘Marie, – do you wish to see me disgraced and ruined? I have done a great deal for you.’

‘You turned away the only person I ever cared for,’ said Marie.

‘Marie, how can you be so wicked? Do as your papa bids you,’ said Madame Melmotte.

40 ‘No!’ said Melmotte. ‘She does not care who is ruined, because we saved her from that reprobate.’

‘She will sign them now,’ said Madame Melmotte.

45 ‘No; – I will not sign them,’ said Marie. ‘If I am to be married to Lord Nidderdale as you all say, I am sure I ought to sign nothing without telling him. And if the property was once made to be mine, I don’t think I ought to give it up again because papa says that he is going to be ruined. I think that’s a reason for not giving it up again.’ (Anthony Trollope, *The Way We Live Now*)

You might say that this passage is ‘all about’ character. The four guiding questions in the exam in which it was used all had to do with the people as individuals, the relationships among them, and the techniques used by the writer in presenting them.

Let’s do something simple first (you may want to use a photocopy of the passage, if you don’t want to mark your copy of the book).

Use a different coloured pen or highlighter for each of the three characters. Read the passage once more just to clarify what happens in it, then go through it again and underline or highlight any words, phrases or sentences which tell us something interesting about one of the three people in the extract; then do the same for each of the other two. (You may prefer to deal with all three characters at one reading.)

As you work through the passage, add brief notes in the margin to remind yourself of what it was you found interesting.

Here’s the passage again, with underlining but no margin notes (try not to look at this until you’ve produced your own version). If we have underlined things that you overlooked, see if you can work out what they tell us.

Key: Marie Melotte Madame Melotte

(Do you see anything significant in the underline styles and colours we’ve chosen?)

‘I don’t think I will sign them.’

‘Why not sign them? You can’t really suppose that the property is your own. You could not even get it if you did think so.’

5 ‘I don’t know how that may be; but I had rather not sign them. If I am to be married, I ought not to sign anything except what he tells me.’

‘He has no authority over you yet. I have authority over you. Marie, do not give more trouble. I am very much pressed for time. Let me call in Mr Croll.’

‘No, papa,’ she said.

10 Then came across his brow that look which had probably first induced Marie to declare that she would endure to be ‘cut to pieces’, rather than to yield in this or that direction. The lower jaw squared itself, and the teeth became set, and the nostrils of his nose became extended, – and Marie began to prepare herself to be ‘cut to pieces’. But he reminded himself that there was another game which he had proposed to play before he resorted to anger and violence. He would tell her how much depended on her compliance. Therefore he relaxed the frown, – as well as he
15 knew how, and softened his face towards her, and turned again to his work. ‘I am sure, Marie, that you will not refuse to do this when I explain to you its importance to me. I must have that property for use in the city tomorrow, or – I shall be ruined.’ The statement was very short, but the manner in which he made it was not without effect.

‘Oh!’ shrieked his wife.

20 ‘It is true. These harpies have so beset me about the election that they have lowered the price of every stock in which I am concerned, and have brought the Mexican Railway so low that they cannot be sold at all. I don’t like bringing my troubles home from the city; but on this occasion I cannot help it. The sum locked up here is very large, and I am compelled to use it. In point of fact it is necessary to save us from destruction.’ This he said, very slowly and with the utmost
25 solemnity.

- 'But you told me just now you wanted it because I was going to be married,' rejoined Marie.
A liar has many points to his favour, – but he has this against him, that unless he devote more time to the management of his lies than life will generally allow, he cannot make them tally. Melmotte was thrown back for a moment, and almost felt that the time for violence had come.
- 30 He longed to be at her that he might shake the wickedness, and the folly, and the ingratitude out of her. But he once more condescended to argue and to explain. 'I think you misunderstood me, Marie. I meant you to understand that settlements must be made, and that of course I must get my own property back into my own hands before anything of that kind can be done. I tell you once more, my dear, that if you do not do as I bid you, so that I may use that property the first
- 35 thing tomorrow, we are all ruined. Everything will be gone.'
'This can't be gone,' said Marie, nodding her head at the papers.
'Marie, – do you wish to see me disgraced and ruined? I have done a great deal for you.'
'You turned away the only person I ever cared for,' said Marie.
'Marie, how can you be so wicked? Do as your papa bids you,' said Madame Melmotte.
- 40 'No!' said Melmotte. 'She does not care who is ruined, because we saved her from that reprobate.'
'She will sign them now,' said Madame Melmotte.
'No; – I will not sign them,' said Marie. 'If I am to be married to Lord Nidderdale as you all say, I am sure I ought to sign nothing without telling him. And if the property was once made to
- 45 be mine, I don't think I ought to give it up again because papa says that he is going to be ruined. I think that's a reason for not giving it up again.'

Notes on the underline style – not to be taken too seriously; but diagrams, colours and sketches can help you identify the interesting features in a piece of writing, particularly if you're a visual learner:

Marie: a straight, sharp, single blue line, representing her incisiveness

Melmotte: a loud, emphatic, double red line – his aggressiveness

Madame Melmotte: a broken, uncertain, slightly dotted line in an indistinct colour.

On the next page there's a representation of what your notes might look like, if you managed to say something about all of the underlined items.

<i>Cautious</i>	<u>'I don't think I will sign them.'</u>	
	'Why not sign them? <u>You can't really suppose</u> that the property is your own. You could not even get it if you did think so.'	<i>Sarcastic</i>
<i>Resentful</i>	'I don't know how that may be; but I had rather not sign them. <u>If I am to be married</u> , I ought not to sign anything except what he tells me.'	
	'He has no authority over you yet. <u>I have authority over you</u> . Marie, do not give more trouble. I am very much pressed for time. Let me call in Mr Croll.'	<i>Domineering</i>
<i>Defiant</i>	<u>'No, papa,' she said.</u>	
<i>Stubborn</i>	Then came across his brow that look which had probably first induced Marie to declare that <u>she would endure to be 'cut to pieces', rather than to yield in this or that direction. The lower jaw squared itself, and the teeth became set, and the nostrils of his nose became extended,</u> – and Marie began to prepare herself to be 'cut to pieces'. But he reminded himself that <u>there was another game which he had proposed to play before he resorted to anger and violence.</u> He would tell her how much depended on her compliance. Therefore he relaxed the frown, – <u>as well as he knew how,</u> and softened his face towards her, and turned again to <u>his work.</u> 'I am sure, Marie, that you will not refuse to do this when I explain to you its importance to me. I must have that property for use in the city tomorrow, <u>or – I shall be ruined.</u> ' The statement was very short, but the manner in which he made it was not without effect.	<i>Aggressive</i>
<i>Courageous</i>		<i>Scheming Dangerous Deceitful Dedicated to this task Self-dramatising</i>
<i>Hysterical, slightly ridiculous</i>	<u>'Oh!' shrieked his wife.</u>	
	'It is true. These harpies have so beset me about the election that they have lowered the price of every stock in which I am concerned, and have brought the Mexican Railway so low that they cannot be sold at all. <u>I don't like bringing my troubles home from the city;</u> but on this occasion I cannot help it. The sum locked up here is very large, and I am compelled to use it. In point of fact it is necessary to save us from destruction.' <u>This he said, very slowly and with the utmost solemnity.</u>	<i>'Protective' Manipulative</i>
<i>Sharp, argumentative</i>	<u>'But you told me just now</u> you wanted it because I was going to be married,' <u>rejoined Marie.</u>	
	A liar has many points to his favour, – but he has this against him, that unless he devote more time to the management of his lies than life will generally allow, he cannot make them tally. Melmotte was thrown back for a moment, and almost felt that the time for violence had come. <u>He longed to be at her</u> that he might shake the wickedness, and the folly, and the ingratitude out of her. But <u>he once more condescended to argue and to explain.</u> 'I think you misunderstood me, Marie. I meant you to understand that settlements must be made, and that of course I must get my own property back into my own hands before anything of that kind can be done. I tell you once more, my dear, that if you do not do as I bid you, so that I may use that property the first thing tomorrow, we are all ruined. Everything will be gone.'	<i>Dishonest Violent Patronising, devious</i>
<i>Incisive</i>	<u>'This can't be gone,'</u> said Marie, nodding her head at the papers.	
	'Marie, – do you wish to see me disgraced and ruined? <u>I have done a great deal for you.'</u>	<i>Manipulative</i>
<i>Resentful Subservient</i>	<u>'You turned away the only person I ever cared for,'</u> said Marie.	
	'Marie, how can you be so wicked? <u>Do as your papa bids you,</u> ' said Madame Melmotte.	
	'No!' said Melmotte. 'She does not care who is ruined, because we saved her from that reprobate.'	
<i>Unrealistic Defiant/ Resentful</i>	<u>'She will sign them now,'</u> said Madame Melmotte.	
	<u>'No; – I will not sign them,'</u> said Marie. 'If I am to be married to Lord Nidderdale <u>as you all say,</u> I am sure I ought to sign nothing without telling him. And if the property was once made to be mine, I don't think I ought to give it up again because papa says that he is going to be ruined. <u>I think that's a reason for not giving it up again.'</u>	
<i>Logical</i>		

There's no reason why you shouldn't set out your notes in the exam in exactly the same way. If you are working from guiding questions you can colour-code the notes in response to each question, then write your answers from those coded notes.

Other Things to Note about Characters

Go beyond what kind of people they are. If you simply write about them as if they're 'real' then yes, you're paying the writer a compliment – his characters have convinced you. But the examiner will want to see that you can distinguish between literature and life, and write about characters as the creations of someone's imagination.

One way of doing so is to consider the techniques the writer has used to bring his characters alive for us. In the Anthony Trollope passage look at the use of dialogue (what the characters say and their style of speech). Here are some interesting phrases from that dialogue in addition to those we've already looked at:

- 1 *'I don't think'*
- 4 *'I had rather not'*
- 4 *'I am to be married'*
- 20 *'harpies'* (predatory monsters in Greek mythology)
- 23 *'compelled'*
- 26 *'But'*
- 33 *'my own...my own'*

Try to work out how each phrase adds just a little bit more to our understanding of the character who speaks it, and perhaps of his or her attitude towards another character. Then find some further examples from *line 34* onwards.

There's also the way they speak (rather than the content or style of what they say), as noted by the writer:

- 9 *'declare'*
- 18 *'The manner in which he made it'*
- 19 *'shrieked'*

Find one example of your own in *lines 24-25* and one in *line 26*.

Then there are the gestures and the way the characters move:

- 10-11 *'the lower jaw squared itself'* etc

There's another example in *line 36*...

Sometimes the writer himself will take a more direct hand and say something blunt about one of his characters. If he does that we usually aren't meant to question it. There's a very good example in *line 27*.

Other clues about characters from...

- o what they say:
 - 34 *'my dear'* – false endearment
 - 39 *'wicked'* – Mrs M's moral outrage: her way of life (as established by Melmotte) is threatened.
 - 45-46 *'I don't think...I think'* – she is developing a clear independence of mind.
 - 45 *'papa says'* – she doubts his account of things.
- o how they say it:
 - 24-25 *'very slowly and with the utmost solemnity'* – he's trying to frighten her.
 - 26 *'rejoined'* – as if Marie is bouncing back at her father
- o their movements:
 - 36 *'nodding her head at the papers'* – she is presenting her evidence, almost triumphantly.
- o the writer's declaration:
 - 27 *'A liar'*

The list of writers' methods could continue: what about the characters' appearance? Their past history? The things other people say about them? (There's not much sign of any of those in this passage, however.)

It all adds up! And it has to add up in another sense: the characters must be consistent if we are to believe in them (unless of course inconsistency is one of their traits). That's much more important in a whole novel or play, naturally.

The Question of Relationships

None of the characters in this extract is particularly unusual or interesting in himself or herself (we ended up saying some fairly ordinary things about them). What may have held our attention, though, is their interaction. We can even see how each one, as a person, has been affected by how the others are, as people. Melmotte is a bully because his wife and the other people around him have allowed him to bully them. Madame Melmotte is compliant because she's afraid of Melmotte's anger, and she believes Marie will sign the papers because defying Melmotte is unthinkable; Marie is only stubborn because Melmotte is domineering. More importantly, we see that these relationships are going to change. Marie now has power over Melmotte for the first time; and she has a score to settle.

So be prepared in your exam for questions about how the characters in a passage respond to each other; and if you're writing a 'free' commentary pay attention to that anyway, and to the way the writer directs our attention to those interplays.

This applies to poetry as well as prose. Think about the relationship between the poet and his mother in *Testing the Reality* and the poet and his father in *My Father's Garden*. (There were questions about both of those relationships in the exams from which the poems were taken.)

That finishes our work on *The Way We Live Now*. We could look in more detail at the **Setting, Action** etc, of the passage, but we've touched on them all as we've considered the characters, and you've probably had enough for the moment, so:

Before we move on to look at a poem centred around a character, take a moment to think back to the last passage and decide what is most memorable about it. You'll probably choose Marie's defiance of her oppressive father (with no help at all from her mother). As students of literature rather than life, however, you need to be aware of the subtle techniques by which Trollope brings that defiance to the fore so that we do remember it above all else.

The next poem is about a single person (it's not from a past **IB** paper; a commentary on the **IB** 'equivalent' poem can be found in the 'Analysis of further passages' section, page 63).

PASSAGE 6

Walter Llywarch

I am, as you know, Walter Llywarch,
Born in Wales of approved parents,
Well goitred¹, round in the bum;
Sure prey of the slow virus
5 Bred in quarries of grey rain.

Born in autumn at the right time
For hearing stories from the cracked lips
Of old folk dreaming of summer,
I piled them on to the bare hearth
10 Of my own fancy to make a blaze
To warm myself, but achieved only
The smoke's acid that brings the smart
Of false tears into the eyes.

Months of fog, months of drizzle:
15 Thought wrapped in the grey cocoon
Of race, of place, awaiting the sun's
Coming; but when the sun came
Striking the hills with a hot hand,
Wings were spread only to fly
20 Round and round in a cramped cage,
Or beat in vain at the sky's window.

School in the week; on Sunday chapel:
Tales of a land fairer than this
Were not so tall, for others had proved it
25 Without the grave's passport; they sent
Its fruit home for ourselves to taste...

Walter Llywarch! The words were the name
On a lost letter that never came
For one who waited in the long queue
30 Of life that wound through a Welsh valley.
I took instead, as others had done
Before, a wife from the back pew
In chapel, rather to share the rain
Of winter evenings than to intrude
35 On her pale body. And yet we lay
For warmth together and laughed to hear
Each new child's cry of despair.

R S Thomas

¹goitred: suffering from a swelling on the neck; ²pew: long wooden bench in a church

Character

Begin by noting what we gather from the poem about Walter Llywarch. Use the following headings:

- o Age
- o Parentage
- o Appearance
- o Early hopes
- o Job
- o Marriage
- o Later life and fatherhood

These are mundane matters, and it's not necessary for you to write the details down; but in researching them you'll become more confident that you understand the poem (good advice is to start with the simple things).

(See Box 26 in the Answers Booklet)

But what does 'mundane' mean? Ordinary, everyday, dull? Yes, and that's what Walter's life has seemed to him; so the very fact that the poem concerns itself largely with the plain details of his existence adds to our sense that he is a man trapped in sombreness.

Why, then, write a poem about a man who lives such an unexceptional life?

There are two possible answers. One is that even ordinary men deserve our attention. The other is that Walter isn't so ordinary after all.

Let's begin with the first, the larger, idea.

Here's a typical poetry exam question:

'Poets explore the significance of ordinary things in extraordinary ways.'

Analyse two or three poems you know well in order to demonstrate the 'extraordinary ways' in which poets explore the significance of ordinary things.

For 'ordinary things' read 'ordinary people', and you have an essay question which you could use *Walter Llywarch* to answer. Walter may be ordinary; but he matters; and the fact that he matters is brought home to us by extraordinary (poetic) means.

The very existence of the poem is in itself a principal 'means': the fact that R S Thomas gave whatever he gave to produce this fine piece of writing is sure indication that Walter Llywarch mattered to him; and if to him, why not to us?

Other methods will emerge as we discuss the poem in more detail.

So let's move on to the second suggestion, that Walter isn't so ordinary after all. You wouldn't be surprised if one of the examiner's guiding questions was, simply, 'What do we learn about Walter Llywarch from the poem?' Let's build on the basic knowledge we gathered in our earlier reading.

Imagine yourself having picked up a handful of pebbles on the seashore (the facts we listed in the box above, or something like them). They're sand-dusted and salt-stained and you can't see them altogether clearly, so you take them down to the sea and wash them off. (Keep your eyes open, as you walk down and back up the beach, for other, smaller pebbles...) Details, patterns, colours and other possibilities emerge. This one has a grain to it; that one has a hole through it; another isn't a pebble at all but a worn-down piece of shell.

Having looked at the poem, in other words, you must now look at it more closely, take a magnifying glass to it if you like – and be prepared to change your mind about what's there.

Here are some further questions, about Walter and how he is presented, to help you do that.

Verse One:

- o '*I am*': The poem from its very opening is a dec.....
- o '*As you know*': How do we know?
- o '*Born in Wales*': Why give early prominence to the fact?
- o '*Well goitred*': What does the form of the verb '*goitred*' suggest? (The poet could have written 'with large goitres'.)
- o '*Round in the bum*': What's the tone of that phrase?
- o '*Sure prey of the slow virus*': Is he suggesting that his lack of health is a result of his surroundings, has been caused by pollution or something similar?
- o '*Prey*' in any case reinforces the idea that he is a?

(See Box 27 in the Answers Booklet)

Verse Two:

- o *'The bare hearth of my own fancy'*: Walter's early imagination was.....
- o *'Achieved only the smoke's acid'*: He failed to.....
- o *'Acid'* suggests that his failure was.....
- o *'False tears'*: Why false?

(See Box 28 in the Answers Booklet)

Verse Three:

- o *'Cocoon...wings'*: Explain the image.

(See Box 29 in the Answers Booklet)

Verse Four:

- o How does Walter know that the old folks' stories, and the ones he hears later in school and at the chapel, are not *'tall'*, i.e. that the place *'fairer than this'* they tell of does really exist?

(See Box 30 in the Answers Booklet)

Verse Five:

- o *'Walter Llywarch!'*: What feeling does the exclamation mark express?
- o Is there any criticism implied in the picture of Walter waiting for a letter which would change his life?
- o *'The long queue /Of life'*: The image suggests that Walter was.....
- o Walter married to avoid.....
- o But the marriage was not an empty one: it produced.....

(See Box 31 in the Answers Booklet)

Let's go back to our second question now, and answer it honestly. We have pulled out a lot of detail from the poem, but does any of it make Walter seem exceptional? Perhaps we should change our minds and describe him as ordinary after all; but also as special – *because* he is so ordinary. Is that too much of a paradox?

Don't forget the other people: There are other characters in the poem. List them and make notes on how they add to the poem's meaning or effect.

- o Walter's parents: *'Approved'* means, principally, thought well of, and gives us a picture of a close-knit community which watches itself and its members closely. The word also carries the idea of 'tried and tested' ('proved'), however: Walter's parents have survived, however harsh their lives, and the same is expected of him.
- o *'Old folk dreaming of summer'*: A glimpse of what Walter will one day become. (Why are their lips described as *'cracked'*?)
- o His wife: Why *'from the back pew /In chapel'*? Why does the poet note that her body is *'pale'*? What does his use of the word *'intrude'* suggest about their life together?

Finally, ask yourself what R S Thomas wants us to feel about Walter; and whether we do feel that.

What we've done in our analysis, overall, is retell the story of Walter's whole life, in as much detail as we can, paraphrasing, amplifying and speculating. But in doing that we've lost much of the power of the poem, and it would be a good idea at this point to go back and read it through again, as a poem instead of a test. Try reading it *aloud*.

Now some quick thoughts and questions about the other features of the poem.

1. Setting

- o What you'll recall most about the place where Walter lived will be, perhaps, the generally miserable weather (you can list the details if you like). It helps to both symbolise and explain his whole demeanour. Take a second look at one particular phrase, *'Bred in quarries of grey rain'*. We took it to suggest that Walter might work in a quarry. Can you see any other meaning for it?
- o Then there's the sun. It should be an antidote to the greyness of the rest of the year. But find a single word indicating that when it comes it comes as an attack rather than as relief.

3. Action

- o The story is best classified as a brief poetic au.....

4. Style

- o The poem's style is that of a lament, an outcry against the death of someone or in this case of someone's hopes. What's the best illustration (of sad-sounding language) from the first verse?

5. Ideas

- o Is there horror in the poem's final two lines?

(See Box 32 in the Answers Booklet)

You'll find further ideas about, and practice on, *Character* in Section One Part 6: Analysis of further passages from SL papers (page 63).

Part 3: A Focus on Action

PASSAGE 7

Since that terrible night six months ago, Ishvar had given up their lodging in the rooming house, at Ashraf's insistence. There was plenty of space in the house, he claimed, now that his daughters had all married and left. He partitioned the room over the shop – one side for [his wife] Mumtaz and himself, the other for Ishvar and his nephew [Omprakash].

They heard Omprakash moving around upstairs, getting ready for bed. Mumtaz sat at the back of the house, praying. 'This revenge talk is okay if it remains talk,' said Ishvar. 'But what if he goes back to the village, does something foolish.'

They fretted and agonised for hours over the boy's future, then ascended the stairs to retire for the night. Ashraf followed Ishvar around the partition where Omprakash lay sleeping, and they stood together for a while, watching him.

'Poor child,' whispered Ashraf. 'So much he has suffered. How can we help him?'

The answer, in time, was provided by the faltering fortunes of Muzaffar Tailoring Company.

A year had passed since the murders when a ready-made clothing store opened in town. Before long, Ashraf's list of clients began to shrink.

Ishvar said the loss would be temporary. 'A big new shop with stacks of shirts to choose from – that attracts the customers. It makes them feel important, trying on different patterns. But the traitors will return when the novelty wears off and the clothes don't fit.'

Ashraf was not so optimistic. 'Those lower prices will defeat us. They make clothes by the hundreds in big factories, in the city. How can we compete?'

Soon the two tailors and apprentice were lucky to find themselves busy one day a week. 'Strange, isn't it,' said Ashraf. 'Something I've never even seen is ruining the business I have owned for forty years.'

'But you've seen the ready-made shop.'

'No, I mean the factories in the city. How big are they? Who owns them? What do they pay? None of this I know, except that they are begging us. Maybe I'll have to go and work for them in my old age.'

'Never,' said Ishvar. 'But perhaps I should go.'

'Nobody is going anywhere,' Ashraf's fist banged the worktable. 'We will share what there is here, I said it only as a joke. You think I would really send away my own children?'

'Don't be upset, Chachaji, I know you didn't mean it.'

Before long, however, the joke turned into a serious consideration as customers continued to flee to the ready-made store. 'If it goes on like this, the three of us will be sitting from morning till night, swatting flies,' said Ashraf. 'For me, it does not matter. I have lived my life – tasted its fruit, both sweet and bitter. But it is so unfair to Om.' He lowered his voice. 'Maybe it would be best for him to try elsewhere.'

'But wherever he goes, I would have to go,' said Ishvar. 'He is still too young, too many foolish ideas clogging his head.'

'Not his fault, the devil encourages him. Of course you have to be with him, you

are now his father. What you can both do is, go for a short time. Doesn't have to be
45 permanent. A year or two. Work hard, earn money, and come back.'

'That's true. They say you can make money very quickly in the city, there is so
much work and opportunity.'

'Exactly. And with that cash you can open some kind of business here when you
return. A paan¹ shop, or a fruit stall, or toys. You can even sell ready-made clothes,
50 who knows.' They laughed at this, but agreed that a couple of years away would be
best for Omprakash.

'There is only one difficulty in the way,' said Ishvar. 'I don't know anyone in the
city. How to get started?'

'Everything will fall into place. I have a very good friend who will help you find
55 work. His name is Nawaz. He is also a tailor, has his own shop there.'

They sat up past midnight, making plans, imagining the new future in the city by
the sea, the city that was filled with big buildings, wide, wonderful roads, beautiful
gardens, and millions and millions of people working hard and accumulating wealth.

'Look at me, getting excited as if I was leaving with you,' said Ashraf. 'And if I
60 was younger I would, too. It will be lonely here. My dream was that you and Om
would be with me till the end of my days.'

'But we will be,' said Ishvar. 'Om and I will return soon. Isn't that the plan?'

Rohinton Mistry *A Fine Balance* (1995)

¹ paan: betel nut mixed with lime and served in a green leaf, used in India as a chew

Just to get things going: what happened on '*that terrible night six months ago*' (line 1)?

Answer: ...deredrum erew elpoeP

Action

Not a great deal happens during the course of this passage itself, though, does it? A tailor, with his nephew, moves in with another, older tailor (maybe his father) and his wife. Then a down-turn in the tailoring business forces the younger tailor to consider taking his nephew to the city to find work.

So why have we chosen it as an example of **Action** in a short piece of writing?

Well, you wouldn't expect an extract of this length to include a large number of events anyway. If it did, there wouldn't be room for very much else. And it's the 'else' surrounding events which give them their significance – in particular the way people are affected by, consider, respond to, the events. So there's a kind of secondary action in play: what goes on inside and between the characters, as opposed to what takes place external to them.

The outside events themselves constitute what we might call the 'contextual' action. That includes:

- o the events that have already taken place
- o the events that occur during the course of the passage, but in the wider world
- o the events that seem likely to happen in the future.

These are the things which happen outside the limits of the ‘on-stage’ story. Begin your work on this passage by listing the details of all three parts (past, present and future) of this contextual action.

Then answer these questions:

a) Are we given any clues as to who has been murdered?

b) Who is the ‘*apprentice*’ (line 24)?

(See Box 33 in the Answers Booklet)

All we have done so far is clarify the basics of the passage. That will be an important part of what you do, initially, in the exam: you must work out, at a simple level, just what is happening – who the characters are and what their situation is. A bad mistake here (through hurried reading) can cost you dear...so take time, and re-read the passage as often as you need.

We can now look at some of the subtleties of the story as it is told.

c) How does the writer suggest that Ishvar’s and Omprakash’s move in with Ashraf is problematical?

d) What do we learn later in the passage which helps explain Ashraf’s eagerness to make room for them?

e) How does fate (in the form of unexpected, external events) take a hand in their story?

f) Important developments in the narrative are introduced by key phrases referring to the passing of time. ‘*Since that...night six months ago*’ (line 1) is the first one. Find the others (there are four).

(See Box 34 in the Answers Booklet)

We could call these last details, in *f*), ‘time markers’: they are an important way in which a writer keeps us in touch with the thread of the story. If you are asked a question about the structure of a prose passage or poem you will find that the time markers will help you identify that structure.

g) See if you can find the time markers in the following passages: A (page 4); B (page 7); F (page 26)

(See Box 35 in the Answers Booklet)

Other practice:

1. Setting

Times are changing, economically. What signs are there that changes are also taking place in the way people think?

2. Character

Identify the touches of (mild) humour in the passage.

4. Style

Why does Rohinton Mistry write that the two men '*ascended the stairs to retire for the night*' (lines 9-10) rather than just 'went up to bed'?

5. Ideas

What idea is Ashraf emphasising by banging on the table (*line 32*)?

(See Box 36 in the Answers Booklet)

PASSAGE 8

The Interrogation

We could have crossed the road but hesitated,
And then came the patrol;
The leader conscientious and intent,
The men surly, indifferent.
5 While we stood by and waited
The interrogation began. He says the whole
Must come out now, who, what we are,
Where we have come from, with what purpose, whose
Country or camp we plot for or betray.
10 Question on question.
We have stood and answered through the standing day
And watched across the road beyond the hedge
The careless lovers in pairs go by,
Hand linked in hand, wandering another star,
15 So near we could shout to them. We cannot choose
Answer or action here,
Though still the careless lovers saunter by
And the thoughtless field is near.
We are on the very edge,
20 Endurance almost done,
And still the interrogation is going on.

Edwin Muir, *The Labyrinth* (1949)

Action

‘Incident’ and ‘episode’ are useful words when you are writing about **Action**. What’s the difference between them? Is the event described in this poem an incident or an episode?

(See Box 37 in the Answers Booklet)

- a)** What phrases in the first two lines suggest on the one hand that chance has played a part in this encounter, and on the other that there is something inevitable about it?
- b)** What is the effect of the change of tense in *line 6*?
- c)** By what means does the writer convey a sense of this being a static incident, with no movement forward and no discernible outcome?
- d)** How does he also, however, indicate that the incident is approaching a climax?

(See Box 38 in the Answers Booklet)

The Other Areas

1. Setting

How does the poet use the road as a symbol of division between two worlds?

2. Character

What effect does the writer's use of the first person plural (*'We'*) have on the reader?

4. Style

What is the effect of the rhyme in *lines 3 and 4*?

5. Ideas

Do you think the captured men are soldiers or refugees? Does our response to the poem depend in part on the answer we give to that question?

(See Box 39 in the Answers Booklet)



Part 4: A Focus on Style

PASSAGE 9

He charged upon her. There in the open. More like a lion. He came, grey all over, his grey hair – or the grey patches of his hair – charging down the steps, having slammed the hall door. And lopsided. He was carting under his arm a diminutive piece of furniture. A cabinet.

5 It was so quick. It was like having a fit. The houses tottered. He regarded her. He had presumably checked violently in his clumsy stride. She hadn't seen because of the tottering of the houses. His stone-blue eyes came fishily into place in his wooden countenance – pink and white. Too pink where it was pink and too white where it was white. Too much so for health.

What was he doing? Fumbling in the pocket of his clumsy trousers. He exclaimed – she shook at the sound of his slightly grating, slightly gasping voice:

10 'I'm going to sell this thing...Stay here.' He had produced a latch-key. He was panting fiercely beside her. Beside her. Beside her. It was infinitely sad to be beside this madman. It was infinitely glad. Because if he had been sane she would not have been beside him. She would be beside him for a long space of time if he were mad. Perhaps he did not recognize her! She might be beside him for long space of time with him not recognizing her. Like tending your baby!

15 (He opens the door and bids her step inside and wait for him.)

She stepped irresolutely into the shadows: she turned irresolutely to the light...

It was Armistice Day¹. She had forgotten. She was to be cloistered² on Armistice Day. Ah, not cloistered! Not cloistered there. My beloved is mine and I am his! But she might as well close the door.

20 She ought to go away: Instead she had shut the door...No! She ought not to go away! She ought not! He had told her to wait. She was not cloistered. This was the most exciting spot on the earth. It was not her fate to live nun-like. She was going to pass her day beside a madman; her night too...My beloved is mine and I am His!

25 My beloved is...Why does one go on repeating that ridiculous thing! She did not want to quote the thing. It was jumped out of her by sheer nerves. She was afraid. She was waiting for a madman in an empty house. Noises whispered up the empty stairway!

Source Unknown

¹ Armistice Day: Day commemorating the end of World War I

² Cloistered: Shut away (as in a nunnery)

You're probably somewhat puzzled by this passage: What's it *about*?

Don't worry too much for the moment. Ask yourself this question instead: what impressions are we left with when we've read the passage for the first time?

(See Box 40 in the Answers Booklet)

So many conflicting feelings in what is quite a short passage! How does that come about?

Largely through the passage's *Style*, the words the writer has chosen and the order he has used them in.

Here is the first example of each of the impressions we listed above. Add further examples from the passage, and consider the mechanics of each example – how does it contribute to that particular impression?

- o Violence: '*He charged upon her*' (line 1). List, as we have suggested, any further examples you can find, then compare your notes with those in the box below. Then try...
- o Ridiculousness: '*And lopsided*' (lines 2-3)
- o Confusion: '*It was so quick*' (line 4)
- o Fear: '*She shook*' (line 8)
- o Sadness: '*Infinately sad*' (line 11)
- o Joy and excitement: '*Infinately glad*' (line 12)
- o Indecision: '*She stepped...light*' (line 16)

(See Box 41 in the Answers Booklet)

Violence:

(See Box 42 in the Answers Booklet)

Ridiculousness:

Confusion: (See Box 43 in the Answers Booklet)

Fear: (See Box 44 in the Answers Booklet)

Sadness: (See Box 45 in the Answers Booklet)

Joy and excitement: (See Box 46 in the Answers Booklet)

Indecision: (See Box 47 in the Answers Booklet)

A few other items of style we haven't covered:

- o What effect does the word '*diminutive*' (*line 3*) have?
- o Repetitions and echoes – we've noted only some.

- o The bathos of *'My beloved is mine and I am his! But she might as well close the door'* (lines 20-21). Bathos has nothing to do with pathos. It's a sudden descent from elevated subject matter or language to mundane things or words, usually for comic effect. Here it emphasises the woman's feelings of confusion and inner conflict. It also adds a realistic touch: in moments of stress we turn to habitual or practical actions for re-orientation and reassurance. Is there another example in the passage?
- o The sentence structure (in addition to the antithesis already noted). It's.....
- o Use of exclamations. How many in the passage?

(See Box 48 in the Answers Booklet)

Round off this part of your work by listing some adjectives you think could apply to the passage's style. Here are some suggestions for comparison with your own list, when you've completed it:

(See Box 49 in the Answers Booklet)

Since this is quite a short passage and there are a lot of unanswerable questions about its context, we can't say a lot about its other features; but there's always something to note...

Setting

The contrasts between inside and outside and between darkness and light, symbolising the choice the woman faces.

Character

The contradiction in her perceptions of the man (*'lion...baby'*)

Action

The passage holds us at a point of balance in the story (whatever the story is). How literally are we to take the references to being cloistered and living *'nun-like'*? The choice the woman faces may be a more ordinary one, between possible marriage on the one hand and dedication to a career or profession on the other. Don't feel too anxious if you don't fully grasp what a passage is about, and don't be panicked into wild speculation. There'll always be lots to say about a passage even if you haven't got right to the bottom of the situation it lays out.

Ideas

The beauty of madness, or at least of idiosyncrasy. Choices. The power of love. That's probably as much as we can say.



The next passage has been chosen because its style is very different from the naturalistic writing we've just looked at... and because it dates from almost two hundred years ago.

Don't flinch when you're asked to comment on a piece of 'old' writing. Words change, but they don't change that much...and prose and poetry from former times can speak to us with great power today. You'll see in a moment how modern in a sense these verses are, in their focus on how we treat the environment.

PASSAGE 10

178

5 There is a pleasure in the pathless woods,
 There is a rapture on the lonely shore.
 There is society, where none intrudes,
 By the deep Sea, and music in its roar:
 I love not Man the less, but Nature more,
 From these our interviews, in which I steal
 From all I may be, or have been before,
 To mingle with the Universe, and feel
 What I can ne'er express, yet cannot all conceal.

179

10 Roll on, thou deep and dark blue Ocean – roll!
 Ten thousand fleets sweep over thee in vain;
 Man marks the earth with ruin – his control
 Stops with the shore; upon the watery plain

15 The wrecks are all thy deed, nor doth remain
 A shadow of man's ravage, save his own,
 When, for a moment, like a drop of rain,
 He sinks into thy depths with bubbling groan,
Without a grave, unknell'd, uncoffin'd, and unknown.

180

20 His steps are not upon thy paths, – thy fields
 Are not a spoil for him – thou dost arise
 And shake him from thee; the vile strength he wields
 For earth's destruction thou dost all despise,
 Spurning him from thy bosom to the skies,
 And send'st him, shivering in thy playful spray
25 And howling, to his Gods, where haply lies
 His petty hope in some near port or bay,
And dashest him again to earth: – there let him lay.

These three stanzas are from near the end of a long poem – Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (1812-1815)

You'll need to spend rather longer working out what each line of this poem means. (You shouldn't worry if, when you've tried as hard as you can, some bits still puzzle you. You must just hope that they aren't crucially related to a guiding question.)

Don't get bogged down in detail to begin with, though. Once you've had a quick read through the whole piece, write down what you think it's 'saying'. Then go back and identify the central idea in each verse.

- o This whole extract is suggesting that.....
- o The first verse (*Stanza 178*) tells us.....
- o The second verse repeats the idea from *Stanza 178* that....., but then says that.....
- o The idea in the third verse is that the sea is so.....that.....

(See Box 50 in the Answers Booklet)

Now we can look at some aspects of Byron's style. We can make some useful comparisons with the previous passage.

There's quite a difference, is there not? Here are some of the things we said the language of the 'Source Unknown' passage was. Think of some terms opposite in meaning to the following that could be applied to Byron's style:

- o Natural
- o Informal:
- o Incorrect:
- o Unstructured:
- o Original:
- o Varied:

(See Box 51 in the Answers Booklet)

It is, then, very different in some ways from the style of 'Source Unknown'. But what about some of the other things we said that style was?

- o Appropriate
- o Authentic
- o Vivid
- o Powerful and vigorous
- o Dramatic

Byron's style, too, is appropriate: it's rather grand; but then so is his topic.

It's authentic as well. It is the kind of language a man with his background would be expected to use in thinking and writing (a poem) about a subject of great and universal importance. It 'rings true' because he has struggled to express through it some difficult ideas in a fitting manner...and *because* it's consistent, both within itself and with his other writing.

Vivid? If by that we mean 'capable of putting strong images into the reader's head', then consider '*the lonely shore*' (line 2) and '*like a drop of rain*' (line 16).

Powerful and vigorous? What about the opening line of the second verse?

Dramatic? '*send'st him, shivering...And howling, to his Gods...And dashest him again to earth.*'

So the two styles *are* different, but they have some important characteristics in common.

Let's spend a little more time looking at the syntax of the three stanzas.

a) One of the principal things we noticed about the prose passage was its short sentences and non-sentences. What about Byron's poetry?

It largely consists of long sentences (the only short ones are the opening two lines of the poem and the).

b) What's the effect of these long sentences?

c) Whereas the prose was very unstructured (shapeless, spontaneous), the poem is very patterned (verse is, of course, words in a pattern, or pattern in words). The most obvious early example of patterning is *'There is'* (the opening phrase of each of the first three lines). Find some other examples from later in the poem. (Forget the poem's formal rhyme-scheme for the moment.)

(See Box 52 in the Answers Booklet)

What About the Rhyme Scheme?

Rhyme scheme works in some ways like syntax, since within it words are brought together – in a particular order or with a particular connection between them (in this case similarity of sound).

Why do poems rhyme?

That's a large question. A little answer will have to do for the moment. Poems rhyme because poets make music with words...and music is patterns of sound.

We must at some point pay attention, also, to the ***Rhythm*** of poetry (another source of its music) and its overall form. ***Style*** (including rhyme and rhythm) and ***Form*** (the structure, or shape, of a poem) work together. You may want to consider, for instance, the effect produced by the lengthening of each of the final lines of the three verses. What is it?

(See Box 53 in the Answers Booklet)

We should also, before we move on, remind ourselves of another stylistic technique you'll have come across before – **Alliteration** (the repetition of consonants, particularly at the beginning of words). Sometimes alliteration, like rhyme, is used only as a means of enhancing the music of a poem. At other times, also like rhyme (remember '*clutch*' and '*touch*' page 9), it can draw attention to the connections of meaning between words. Byron takes '*pleasure*' from the fact that the woods are '*pathless*': the link in meaning is clear.

Consider the repetition of d, s and h sounds in the last six lines of the extract. Are there any links of meaning between the words which are connected by that alliteration?

(See Box 54 in the Answers Booklet)

What, by the way, is '*howling*' (like 'hissing') an example of?

(See Box 55 in the Answers Booklet)

What job does it do?

(See Box 56 in the Answers Booklet)

Think similarly about the examples of onomatopoeia in *lines 4, 16* and *17*.

1. Setting

Enough said. This poem is *about* its setting (i.e. *our* setting, *our* surroundings).

2. Character

What does the tone of the final words of the extract, '*there let him lay*', tell us about Byron's feelings towards Mankind? Does that feeling contradict a statement he has made earlier in the poem?


3. Action

In so far as there is a story here at all, it is a very generalised one: it's an account (in the present tense) of how man treats the earth and how the sea responds. Would the story (and the poem) have been given more focus if Byron had described a particular shipwreck?

5. Ideas

So where does the poem's irony lie?

(See Box 57 in the Answers Booklet)



You'll find further ideas about, and practice on, *Style* in Part 6: Analysis of further passages from Standard Level Papers (page 57).

Part 5: A Focus on Ideas

Here's another passage about the power of the sea, written from an almost opposite perspective – that of a group of shipwrecked sailors trying to make it to shore in a rowing boat.

PASSAGE 11

'Cook,' remarked the captain, 'there don't seem to be any signs of life about your house of refuge.'

'No,' replied the cook. 'Funny they don't see us!'

5 A broad stretch of lowly coast lay before the eyes of the men. It was of dunes topped with dark vegetation. The roar of the surf was plain, and sometimes they could see the white lip of a wave as it spun up the beach. A tiny house was blocked out black upon the sky. Southward, the slim lighthouse lifted its little gray length.

Tide, wind, and waves were swinging the dinghy northward.

'Funny they don't see us,' said the men.

10 The surf's roar was here dulled, but its tone was, nevertheless, thunderous and mighty. As the boat swam over the great rollers, the men sat listening to this roar. 'We'll swamp sure,' said everybody.

15 It is fair to say here that there was not a life-saving station within twenty miles in either direction, but the men did not know this fact, and in consequence they made dark and opprobrious¹ remarks concerning the eyesight of the nation's life-savers. Four scowling men sat in the dinghy and surpassed records in the invention of epithets.

'Funny they don't see us.'

20 The light-heartedness of a former time had completely faded. To their sharpened minds it was easy to conjure pictures of all kinds of incompetency and blindness and, indeed, cowardice. There was the shore of the populous land, and it was bitter and bitter to them that from it came no sign.

'Well,' said the captain, ultimately, 'I suppose we'll have to make a try for ourselves. If we stay out here too long, we'll none of us have strength left to swim after the boat swamps.'

25 And so the oiler², who was at the oars, turned the boat straight for the shore. There was a sudden tightening of muscles. There was some thinking.

'If we don't all get ashore – ' said the captain. 'If we don't all get ashore, I suppose you fellows know where to send news of my finish?'

30 They then briefly exchanged some addresses and admonitions. As for the reflections of the men, there was a great deal of rage in them. Perchance they might be formulated thus: 'If I am going to be drowned – if I am going to be drowned – if I am going to be drowned, why, in the name of the seven mad gods who rule the sea, was I allowed to come thus far and contemplate sand and trees? Was I brought here merely to have my nose dragged away as I was about to nibble the sacred cheese of life? It is preposterous. If this old ninny-woman, Fate, cannot do better than this, she should be deprived of the management of men's fortunes. She is an old hen
35 who knows not her intention. If she has decided to drown me, why did she not do it in the beginning and save me all this trouble? The whole affair is absurd. But no, she cannot mean to drown me. She dare not drown me. She cannot drown me. Not after all this work.' Afterward the man might have had an impulse to shake his fist at the clouds: 'Just you drown me, now, and then hear what I call you!'

40 The billows that came at this time were more formidable. They seemed always just about to break and rollover the little boat in a turmoil of foam. There was a preparatory and long growl

in the speech of them. No mind unused to the sea would have concluded that the dinghy could ascend these sheer heights in time. The shore was still afar. The oiler was a wily surfman. 'Boys,' he said swiftly, 'she won't live three minutes more, and we're too far out to swim.
45 Shall I take her to sea again, captain?'

'Yes! Go ahead!' said the captain.

This oiler, by a series of quick miracles, and fast and steady oarsmanship, turned the boat in the middle of the surf and took her safely to sea again.

There was a considerable silence as the boat bumped over the furrowed sea to deeper water.
50 Then somebody in gloom spoke: 'Well, anyhow, they must have seen us from the shore by now.'

The gulls went in slanting flight up the wind toward the gray desolate east. A squall, marked by dingy clouds, and clouds brick-red, like smoke from a burning building, appeared from the south-east.

55 'What do you think of those life-saving people? Ain't they peaches?'

Stephen Crane, *The Open Boat, A Tale of the Sea*, (1897)

¹rude

²a crewman from the ship's engine-room

Ideas when they run through a longer piece of writing become *themes*. In a shorter piece they will probably be no more than our or the writer's thoughts about what is happening in the extract itself, about how the people in it are behaving, about what the world in which the episode takes place is like, and so on.

All events, all situations, have ideas attached to them. A man falls off a cliff. Ideas? The suddenness of death; the weakness of the human body; the unforgiving nature of the physical world and its laws; the mysteries of human behaviour.

A ship sinks. A group of sailors take to a small boat. After a hazardous time at sea they reach land and struggle to come ashore. They get close, but the waves are too violent and they are forced to turn back to open water. Ideas? List them...the broad ones at least.

(See Box 58 in the Answers Booklet)

That's how readily ideas can emerge from a simple event, even though the story (here) is what predominates and holds our attention – that, and the spirit of the characters, and the way they speak...there's a lot to be said about all three of those.

What are the more precise ideas of the passage?

They begin to show in *line 4*. The land on which they are pinning their hopes of survival is unpromising. Find details in the same paragraph which support that idea.

(See Box 59 in the Answers Booklet)

What then *is* the idea in this part of the passage?

Simply that hope can be easily misplaced: the men are not going to escape so easily, and their plight is emphasised by the contrast between the puniness and distance of the land and the power and closeness of the raging ocean. You should be able to find at least half a dozen details in *lines 5-12* which convey the sense that they are in the grip of overwhelming forces.

Trust in other people is just as likely to prove ill-founded. *'Funny they don't see us!'* (*line 3*) becomes a comically pathetic refrain. Find the other places it appears; then note how the issue is picked up again – three times – further on, and at the end brings the extract to something of a high point.

(See Box 60 in the Answers Booklet)

'It is fair to say here,' says the author (*line 13*), writing as someone who knows the whole story and is keen that we should be given all the relevant facts. It's not certain, however, which of two groups of people he wants to be *'fair'* to in his judgement of what is happening. Who are the two groups?

(See Box 61 in the Answers Booklet)

Why has the writer made so much, in this way, of the issue of fairness (justice)?

(See Box 62 in the Answers Booklet)

First, however, two other features of the situation are noted. In *lines 22-23* we are reminded that is sometimes the only option; and in *lines 25 on* that death is something that must be..... for.

(See Box 63 in the Answers Booklet)

Then we come to what might be regarded as the heart of the passage, a longer paragraph (beginning *line 28*) in which the men attack the circumstances they find themselves in and also whatever blind or stupid forces brought them here.

Once again the writer takes on a self-declared role: he *represents* the men in the boat, summarising what they say about their fate. He is still interested in the justice of the situation...but now it is the wider issue of Man's vulnerability to the whims of a fickle and incompetent Fate which draws his attention, as it has the sailors'. That is the source of their '*rage*': the unfairness of the fact that they have struggled this far only to be flung back from the shore, and are now likely to die a miserable death within sight of safety.

Symbols can be very powerful. Symbols are signs, objects, or events which carry with them a meaning beyond themselves...and often a weight of emotion as well (think of flags).

This situation is symbolic, and the colourful outburst of the seamen against it is *our* outburst against the cruelties of a life which can so often treat us with arbitrary harshness.

(A word of warning, however: don't look for symbolism in every passage you are given to comment on. That's a particular danger with poetry. Yes, note the obvious symbols and the extra depth they give to a piece of writing; but don't play 'hunt the hidden meaning'.)

So here are some questions on the central part of the passage, designed to help you see just how this main idea, about the cruelty of life, finds expression.

- a) What is the effect of the repetition of '*If I am going to be drowned*'?
- b) Why do they believe the seven gods who rule the sea are mad?
- c) What is the tone of the phrase '*contemplate sand and trees*'? (*lines 31-32*)
- d) It is not the fact that they are going to die that angers the men, but the fact that they are going to die in such a way.
- e) '*Preposterous*' (*line 33*) also expresses the idea identified in *d*). Find another, similar word.
- f) By what means do the men give themselves another chance at surviving...or at least of prolonging their life for a little while?

(See Box 64 in the Answers Booklet)

So lots of ideas branch out from one main one. The last sailor to speak comes close to summing it all up. What he says is, *'What do you think of these life-saving people? Ain't they peaches?'* With a slight change to give it a more universal reference and a more modern ring, he could easily have said: *'What do you think of life? Ain't it a peach?'*

1. Setting

What answer does Nature give to the men's final and weary expression of hope (*'Well, anyhow, they must have seen us from the shore by now', lines 50-51*)?

2. Character

Find, towards the end of the central paragraph (the one beginning *line 28*), an example of illogicality which emphasises the men's basic simple-mindedness and adds a touch of pathos to their outcry.

3. Action

What is the effect of the men's silence as they row out to deeper water (*line 49*)?

4. Style

The sailors' expression of frustration in *line 32-33* (and elsewhere) is comic. Does that diminish the effect of what they are saying?

(See Box 65 in the Answers Booklet)

We can get through the next passage quite quickly, now.

PASSAGE 12

Heritage

Though on the day your hard blue eyes met mine
I did not know I had a heart to keep,
All the dead women in my soul
Stirred in their shrouded sleep.

5 There were strange pulses beating in my throat,
 I had no thought of love: I was a child:
But the dead lovers in my soul
 Awoke and flushed and smiled;

10 And it was years before I understood
 Why I had been so happy at your side
With the dead women in my soul
 Teaching me what to hide.

15 For it was not the springtime that had come,
 Only one strong flower thrusting through the snows,
But the dead women in my soul
 Knew all that summer knows.

Dorothea Mackellar, *New Book of Australian Verse*, 1986

If your brain works like most people's it will have seized on a group of key words from the passage, words which relate to something of interest to most of us – *'heart', 'pulses', 'love', 'lovers'*. That swift and automatic focus will have been followed by one on another group of words – *'dead', 'shrouded', 'soul'*.

So this poem is about Love and Death?

Maybe: that's what our brains will signal to us, anyway, at a first read-through. Then we need to set about refining our understanding – by means of a second reading and then a third, both more thorough. Here are some questions to help you with those further readings.

a) What is the very first hint we receive that the poem may be about love?

b) The meaning of the phrase *'a heart to keep'* becomes clear only if we think of its opposite – 'a heart to lose'. What meaning of the word 'keep' beyond simply 'hold' adds to the significance of the line?

c) Then we come to the initially tricky line *'All the dead women in my soul'*. How to explore its meaning? Make a verse-by-verse list of the things the dead women in the poem *do*; that will help you grasp who they *are*.

d) Now try to write down in one sentence what the poem seems to be saying. It's not about death after all, is it?

(See Box 66 in the Answers Booklet)

Put like that, or however you yourself have put it, the central idea of the poem sounds very flat, doesn't it? That's where the other aspects of poetry, particularly *Style*, come in, and make it different from psychology, or sociology, or philosophy, or journalism, or just 'plain talk'

1. Setting:

Minimal, but the girl and the boy are together *somewhere* in the first verse. We imagine them walking (she is by his side) and by association with the later references to the seasons we see them in the countryside, even perhaps near a.....

2. Character

This seems to be a woman who in the end was *satisfied* with what love brought her. What phrase suggests that her sexual life was full?

3. Action

Find the time markers.

4. Style

What aspect of the writer's childhood does the image of snow (*line 14*) represent?

(See Box 67 in the Answers Booklet)

None of the above is sufficient to explain the power of this poem. When all is said and done, a good poem works by means of a magic of its own which cannot be wholly analysed.

That doesn't mean, however, that we're wasting our time when we try.

We're well on the way to tackling the business of actually writing a commentary. First, however...

Guiding Questions Again

If you are given guiding questions, try to follow these basic rules:

- o Don't begin to answer a question until you're sure you understand it.
- o Check, when you've finished, that you have answered it.
- o If more than one answer is possible (particularly if you're asked for a list) give as many sensible ones as you can think of.
- o Find and use an illustration from the passage for each answer or part of an answer you give.
- o Watch the clock and give each question roughly equal time (**IB Standard Level**: 4 questions, 1^{1/2} hours = ... minutes per question?)
- o If the questions are numbered, number your answers.
- o If you are given a choice of two passages and the instructions say 'either...or', don't, don't try to answer both because you think that might win you more marks or because you run out of things to say about the first one.

Remember that the examiner is not trying to catch you out with his questions; he is trying to help you. Good questions will draw your attention to the important and interesting features of the passage, the things you should be writing about anyway...so *use* the questions, even if you aren't required to answer them one by one.

Write Your Own

Go back to any of the passages you have enjoyed working with, pretend you're the examiner and write a guiding question you think would help candidates explore the passage's 'focus' feature (***Setting*** etc).

You probably won't want to answer your own questions, at least in full; but that's the only way you can test whether a question is a good one. We've given some more examples of typical guiding questions in Box 68 of the Answers Booklet, just in case you get stuck.

(See Box 68 in the Answers Booklet)

Part 6: Analysis of further passages from Standard Level papers (some minus passages)

These are analyses of passages for which we have had difficulty in obtaining suitable copyright permission. We have not been able to reproduce the passages themselves (with the exception of the first) but they may be available to you if you have access to the past **IB** exam papers in which they appeared. You can purchase past IB papers by going to <http://www.ibo.org>.

A prose passage with an emphasis on *Setting*

PASSAGE 13

When I drove over the Pittman line¹ I made two promises to myself. One I kept, the other I did not.

5 The first was that I would get myself a new name. I wasn't crazy about anything I had been called up to that point in life, and this seemed like the time to make a clean break. I didn't have any special name in mind, but just wanted a change. The more I thought about it, the more it seemed to me that a name is not something a person really has the right to pick out, but is something you're provided with more or less by chance. I decided to let the gas tank decide. Wherever it ran out, I'd look for a sign.

10 I came pretty close to being named after Homer, Illinois, but kept pushing it. I kept my fingers crossed through Sidney, Sadorus, Cerro Gordo, Decatur, and Blue Mound, and coasted into Taylorville on the fumes. And so I am Taylor Greer. I suppose you could say I had some part in choosing this name, but there was enough of destiny in it to satisfy me.

15 The second promise, the one that I broke, had to do with where I would end up. I had looked at some maps, but since I had never in my own memory been outside of Kentucky (I was evidently born across the river in Cincinnati, but that is beside the point), I had no way of knowing why or how any particular place might be preferable to any other. That is, apart from the pictures on the gas station toll brochures: Tennessee claimed to be the Volunteer State, and Missouri the Show-Me State, whatever that might mean, and nearly everywhere appeared to have plenty of ladies in fifties hairdos standing near waterfalls. These brochures I naturally did not trust as far as I could
20 throw them out the window. Even Pittman, after all, had once been chosen an All-Kentucky City, on the basis of what I do not know. Its abundance of potato bugs and gossip, perhaps. I knew how people could toot their own horn without any earthly cause.

25 And so what I promised myself is that I would drive west until my car stopped running, and there I would stay. But there were some things I hadn't considered. Mama taught me well about tires, and many other things besides, but I knew nothing of rocker arms. And I did not know about the Great Plain.

30 The sight of it filled me with despair. I turned south from Wichita, Kansas, thinking I might find a way around it, but I didn't. There was central Oklahoma. I had never imagined that any part of a round earth could be so flat. In Kentucky, you could never see too far, since there were always mountains blocking the other side of your view, and it left you the chance to think something good might be just over the next hill. But out there on the plain it was all laid out right in front of you, and no matter how far you looked it didn't get any better. Oklahoma made me feel there

was nothing left to hope for.

35 My car gave out somewhere in the middle of a great emptiness that according to the road signs was owned by the Cherokee tribe. Suddenly the steering wheel bore no relation to where the car was going. By the grace of some miracle I surely did not yet deserve, I managed to wobble off the highway all in one piece and find a service station.

40 The man who straightened out my rocker arm was named Bob Two Two. I am not saying he didn't ask a fair price – I should have been able to fix it myself – but he went home that night with a pocket full of something near half the money I had. I sat in the parking lot looking out over that godless stretch of nothing and came the closest I have ever come to cashing in and plowing under. But there was no sense in that. My car was fixed.

45 I had to laugh, really. All my life, Mama had talked about the Cherokee Nation as our ace in the hole. She'd had an old grandpa that was full-blooded Cherokee, one of the few that got left behind in Tennessee because he was too old or too ornery² to get marched over to Oklahoma. Mama would say, 'If we run out of luck we can always go live on the Cherokee Nation.' She and I both had enough blood to qualify. According to Mama, if you're one-eighth or more they let you in. She called this our 'head rights.'

50 Of course, if she had ever been there she would have known it was not a place you'd ever go to live without some kind of lethal weapon aimed at your hind end. It was clear to me that the whole intention of bringing the Cherokees here was to get them to lie down and die without a fight. The Cherokees believed God was in trees. Mama told me this. When I was a kid I would climb as high as I could in a tree and not come down until dinner. 'That's your Indian blood,'
55 she would say. 'You're trying to see God.'

From what I could see, there was not one tree in the entire state of Oklahoma.

Barbara Kingsolver *The Bean Trees* (1988)

¹ town boundary

² mean, cantankerous

- a) 9-11 What does the long list of the towns the writer passes through emphasise about her journey, and about the way in which she is going to choose her new name?
- b) 13-16 How does the writer indicate that she knows hardly anything about the area? How does that fact contribute to the more general impression she is trying to create?
- c) 16-22 Why is she suspicious of the claims made by the different places she drives through? How do her suspicions add to our understanding of how she views the world?
- d) 21 What does the phrase '*an abundance of potato bugs and gossip*' tell us about the place (Pittman) she has left behind?
- e) 25-33 What is there about the Great Plain which explains the impact it has on her?

- f) 35-38 What phrase sums up the characteristics of the plain? What phrase reminds us that she is suspicious of the places she comes across?
- g) What might Bob Two Two's name indicate about him? Is he honest?
- h) 44-49 What do we learn here about the way the Cherokees have been treated in years gone by? What do we learn about Cherokee society as it now is?
- i) How does the nature of the Great Plain take on, at this point in the passage, a greater significance for the writer?
- j) What word used casually in the paragraph beginning at *line 139* now takes on greater meaning?

Notice the different kinds of setting in evidence:

- o The features of the *geographical* setting – the emptiness of the landscape stretching ahead of the writer, and, later, its treelessness – take on a symbolic significance (i.e. a meaning beyond themselves).
- o The *historical* setting – what was done to the Cherokee nation – is clearly going to be a focus of attention in the story, and may connect with an interest in the *political setting* of the larger narrative.
- o Bob Two Two's apparent honesty – he has charged a fair price for a fair day's work – could be seen to have *moral* and even *economic* implications, particularly if it is shown later that the Cherokees were treated dishonestly by the white man and now struggle to make a living. (We're going well beyond the confines of the passage when we speculate like this, of course, and you shouldn't do that in your commentary.)

Now look through the answers in Box 69 of the Answers Booklet and note any features of the passage you missed when you did your own work on it.

(See Box 69 in the Answers Booklet)

Guiding Questions on Setting (for further practice)

How do features of the landscape through which the writer passes take on an extra significance for her?

This story seems to be about a young woman who is ‘jumping out of the frying pan into the fire’. Show how details of the setting support that idea.



The Other Aspects of the Passage

2. Character

- a) Find details in the following lines to support the idea that the writer is fatalistic (willing to accept whatever life hands out to her) by nature: *5-7;9-10;12;23-24;30-31;32-33;37;41-43;50-51;51-53.*

(This will demonstrate that even a single straightforward question can draw your attention to many of the passage’s details – you have to be willing to search thoroughly and not write down only the first answer you come across, even though it may be a perfectly sound one. You needn’t investigate all of the above references if you don’t want to, but at least look in the boxed section below at the other things you could have said.)

(See Box 70 in the Answers Booklet)

Here's a typical guiding question on **Character**, just to remind you of how details like the ones you have just focused on can help you answer broader questions:

What do we learn from the passage about the kind of woman the central character is?

That's very general, of course; but you're unlikely to get one as precise as the one on her fatalistic outlook. You'd be expected to list each of her personal qualities, with at least one illustration of each. Box 71 in the Answers Booklet suggests some of the things you could mention.

(See Box 71 in the Answers Booklet)

3. Action

- a) The fact that the writer begins this part of her narrative by driving over a '*line*' suggests what?
- b) '*The steering wheel bore no relation to where the car was going.*' How does that detail reflect the way the narrative is unfolding?

(See Box 72 in the Answers Booklet)

A typical and more general guiding question might be:

What indications are there that the woman's past may have a bearing on her future?

(See Box 73 in the Answers Booklet)

4. Style

4-5 'I wasn't crazy about anything I had been called' is an informal, or colloquial, writing style (approximating to speech, or even slang). It is appropriate to the casual, haphazard and chancy way the woman conducts her journey. Find some other examples of the same style.

(See Box 74 in the Answers Booklet)

If you know the word 'laconic' you'll see that it, too, fits her style of writing.

5. Ideas

How central to the passage is the idea that the world is a risky place and that life can be unjust?

You needn't answer that question: but you'll see that much of the material you would need to do so is to be found in the details you explored when we were looking at the story's setting.



A Poem with a Focus on Character

The Geranium, Theodore Roethke (IB Standard Level, June 1990?). A copy of this poem can be found at: <http://www.gawow.com/roethke/poems/220.html> or <http://www.sendcoffee.com/minorsage/geranium.html>

Character

A 'character' in a poem doesn't have to be a person. Another way of looking at that is to say that an object (a flower) can *have* character, and that makes it *like* a person and we can respond to it as if it *is* a person. If we talk or write about it as if it's a person then we are said to be 'personifying' it. You knew that.

Another thing about **Character** is that the person around whom the interest of a piece of writing centres isn't always the one who's written about most. This poem describes a geranium (which is very fully personified, to the point where we can clearly call it one of the poem's three characters). But it's the poet (or the character he is pretending to be: we'll need to deal with that aspect of characterisation – the idea of a 'persona' – later) about whom we learn most in the end. This is what we might call 'reflected characterisation', revealing a character to the reader largely through the way they respond to another character.

Here's a set of questions, then, to help you focus on the three characters in *The Geranium*, and on the way they're presented.

a) 2-4 The geranium is compared both to a poodle and to another flower. Which comparison is more effective? Why?

- b) 5 *'a new routine'*: the geranium had been.....for some time.
- c) 10 *'shriveled'*: connected to.....earlier in the poem. A word later that reinforces both of these is.....
- d) 12 Why *'fuzzy'*?
- e) 13 *'creaked like a tulip'*: another.....
- f) 14 *'endured'*: the poet's feelings toward her?
- g) 16 *'seedy'*: a pun (play on words). The flower is and the man is.....
- h) 18-25 What elements of personality does the geranium reveal in the final stages of the poem (and of her life)?

(See Box 75 in the Answers Booklet)

Are you ready to explore the character of the geranium's owner by yourself? Why not do so in the same way – devise questions and look for answers? (You'll find that the answers sometimes present themselves before the questions...) If you're working in class you could try the questions on each other.

Take a break first.



These are some of this issues that may have come up as you worked on the man's character:

- o *Is he a man rather than a woman?*

- o If he is a man, is the geranium's gender significant?
- o What we learn about the man's lifestyle...and how we learn it
- o His feelings and how they change as the poem develops
- o Our feelings towards him

But What About the Maid?

Poems, like short stories, often have a twist – a sudden change of direction – at the end. One twist here is that poet suddenly realises (too late) that he has lost a friend when the geranium is thrown out: the final line comes as something of a revelation to the reader.

We might however see a more subtle change of direction a little earlier, in the fact that the maid, who was guilty only of doing her job too well, ends up fired. Is it at all ironic that she, as sickly (*'snuffling'*) and deserving of pity as the geranium (she is, sadly, not of the brightest), is treated – and described (*'hag'*) – so harshly? Does the fact that the man had more of a relationship with his flower than with his employee tell us something new about him, or about the poet's attitude towards him?

Careful, here! We're coming close to seeing moralising where there may be none. It's unlikely that Theodore Roethke would have wanted such considerations to get in the way of the touching ending to the poem as it stands. So we've fallen into the trap of looking for hidden meanings 'after the event' – when the real impact of the poem has subsided.

The best poets don't preach.

Persona

Was Theodore Roethke a dissolute young man who smoked and drank too heavily and had heavy sexual encounters at all hours of the night? No? So who is *'I'* in the poem?

A persona is a character a writer pretends to be in order to tell a story ...or, turning it around, a character speaking in the first person (*'I'*, *'Me'*), as if he's the writer.

Writers can have a lot in common with the personae they create, or nothing at all. What the writer feels towards his central character – or his other characters for that matter – is very important. So is what the writer wants *us* to feel about them.

What do we feel towards the man in *The Geranium*?

SCASI Again – just to keep your hand in.

Setting

Done, really. What does the window (*line 19*) represent?

Action


Look simply at how the story falls into time periods (find the ‘time markers’), and how that is reflected in the breaks in the poem and the length of each section.

Style

It’s all about detail. Is there a difference between a ‘*garbage pail*’ (line 1) and a ‘*trash can*’ (line 23)? If there is, why has the poet used the phrases in that order? If you can’t think of anything else, consider their sound.

Ideas

A powerful symbolic representation of what Mankind is doing to the world – or just a poem about a flower?



A Passage with a Focus on Style

A Sort of Preface from *Gorilla My Love*, Toni Cade Bambara (IB Standard Level, May 1991), published by Vintage Books.

Some of the things we say here will reinforce the ideas we introduced when we looked at *Source Unknown* (page 39) and the *Childe Harold* extract (page 43)

How would you describe the style of *this* passage? Sloppy? Incorrect? Difficult to follow?

But it *works*. How?

It’s as appropriate in its own way as the *Childe Harold* passage, that’s how. It’s *natural* – it’s the way the writer talks and writes in her everyday life, and it makes sense to use the same style in the preface to her book. She’s clearly going to be giving us an insight in that book into how she lives, or at least into how the people around her live (in spite of what she says about avoiding autobiography). Our language is an enormously important part of our lives: it characterises us, among other things: so she’ll want to use her ‘own’ words.

We defined style near the beginning of the book as ‘the way words are put together’. ‘Good style’, then, is ‘the best words in the best order’. The best words in the best order are the ones that most fully communicate, but also most fully *match*, what is being written about.

That all sounds very simple; and we’ve chosen this passage because it will allow us to say some very simple and straightforward things about style – which is a pretty complicated topic.

Here’s a reminder of two helpful terms first of all: **Diction** and **Syntax**.

Diction is choice of words (the ‘best’ words in the case of good style).

Syntax (roughly the same as grammar) is the way words are combined in phrases and sentences (their order).

Let's describe the diction of this passage, then. What kind of words has Toni Cade Bambara chosen to introduce her book?

Sloppy and incorrect, you may still want to say (but what is 'correct' language?)

Try to be kinder – call them informal, or colloquial ('typical of speech rather than writing'). Then consider 'authentic' (the kind of words a down-to-earth family might use in a real New York) and 'colourful' and 'vigorous'.

How about humorous? Ironic?

As we apply each of these terms to the passage, we see that language even as basic ('non-literary', you might say) as the writer's can be very effective, in the right context.

So the first thing you have to do when you're thinking about style is to postpone as long as possible any judgement of it, until you've seen how it works. Don't jump to call it 'sloppy', or 'incorrect' – or 'old-fashioned', 'too full of big words' or 'obscure' – terms you'll be tempted to use when you come to consider writing from previous centuries. Give writers a chance to reach you through the words they have chosen; then try to decide why they chose *those* words and why they put them in *that* order...and only then decide how effective (how good) their style is.

'Those words' still, then – the **Diction** of the passage: can you find one word or phrase in 'A Sort of Preface' which is most or all of the things we've listed as typical of Toni Cade Bambara's language – one word or phrase which is sloppy, incorrect, informal, colloquial, authentic, colourful, vigorous, humorous *and* ironical all at the same time?

How about '*catch the floor show*' (line 10)?

It's maybe not incorrect grammatically... but it's probably all of the other things.

Look for one or two more examples.

(See Box 76 in the Answers Booklet)

Syntax now. If you agreed earlier that the passage was difficult to follow, you'll have probably realised that the problem lies in the fact that each of the first two paragraphs is one long, break-neck sentence. We're allowed to pause between them, but then the second one begins with another '*And*', as if the writer didn't really want to stop at all, and we take off at high speed again.

Here are some questions about syntax, and about punctuation (the job of punctuation is to mark out the syntax of a sentence).

- a) We called the diction of the passage authentic. Can you see any way in which the syntax is, as well?
- b) Why are there no speech marks around what the characters say?
- c) Why, on the other hand, does the writer carefully punctuate '5.00 A.M.' and, moreover, use capital letters?

(See Box 77 in the Answers Booklet)

Here's some more quick practice before we move on from this entertaining passage.

1. *Setting*

What details indicate that the writer comes from an impoverished background?

2. *Character*

The writer presents her best friend humorously by showing up a contradiction in her behaviour. Find it.

3. *Action*

The episodes are described as if they are happening now and happening to 'you'. What effect does that have?

4. *Style (a couple of extra details worth noting)*

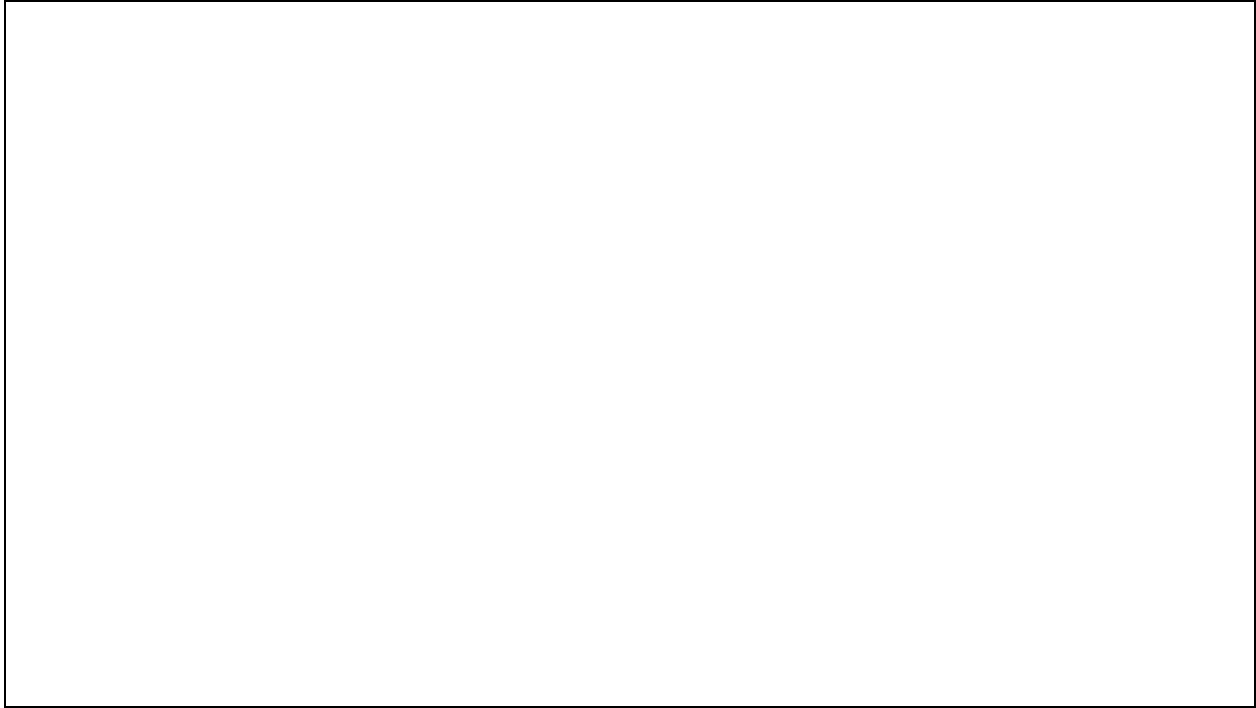
a) 'screamin' (line 6) is something of an over-dramatisation of the event. So is 'death where is thy sting'. Find some more examples. You may recognise them more easily as *exaggerated* language.

b) Some of the imagery of the passage is used with deliberate clumsiness ('stabs you in the back with her pen') to produce a comic effect. Find another example.

5. *Ideas*

What different views do mother and daughter seem to have about what is necessary for 'quality of...life' (line 8)?

(See Box 78 in the Answers Booklet)



Part 7: How to Make Notes (further suggestions)

Suppose, in the exam, you are given four guiding questions. You should probably forget the 1-5 note-taking system we recommended above and go instead for a 1-4 structure, putting a 1 in the margin (supplemented by underlining, notes etc) every time you find something which will help you answer the first question, and so on. Then when you come to write your answer to the question, you'll be able to move down through all the notes you made on the topic, drawing your ideas together.

If you don't have the assistance of guiding questions...well, then you have a difficult choice to make. We'll say more about that later. First of all here's a short passage with guiding questions. Use the system we've just described (numbering to match each question) to make notes on it. The process will be rather similar to the one you practised when you worked on PASSAGE 5, from *The Way We Live Now* (page 19), although there you were concentrating on the different characters in the story.

It's up to you whether, once you've made the notes on this passage, you go on to answer the questions in full – but you should try one, at least.

PASSAGE 14

She was the one who taught scripture and various form subjects. She was the form mistress over us for a year, she was a middle-aged spinster with sandy hair and the beginnings of a sandy moustache and beard, she was Miss Rowena Pringle and she hated me partly because I was hateful and partly because she was hateful and partly because she had a crush on Father Watts-
5 Watt – who had adopted me instead of marrying her – and who was slowly going mad. She had an exquisite niminy-piminy lady-like air. To see her find that she had a blot of ink on her finger – hand up, fingers tapping in a bunch at each other like a tiny, lily-white octopus – was to appreciate just how hysterically clean a lady can be. She withdrew from anything that was soiled – not dirty, soiled – and her religious instruction was just like that. Her clothes were usually in
10 tones of brown. In rainy weather she would wear galoshes¹ and gloves, and be protected all over by a brown umbrella with scallops and silk tassels. She would vanish into the women's staffroom and presently appear in class, picking her way to her high desk, as delicately neat and clean as a chestnut. She wore pince-nez, goldrimmed with a fairy gold chain of almost invisible gold links that descended to the frilly lace on her bosom and was pinned there with a teeny-
15 weeny gold pin. Near the pin there was the watery-gold glimmer of a cut topaz. She had sandy hair, a freckled, slightly fattened face that usually wore a smile of professional benevolence, as arranged and external as her clothes.

William Golding, *Free Fall*

¹ *rubber over-shoes*

Guiding Questions

1. What do we gather from the passage about the writer's feelings towards Miss Pringle?
2. How do the comparisons in the passage add to its meaning?
3. Discuss the writer's use of colour.

You probably don't need any help with that exercise. We've added another, longer, passage below for you to work on, using the same method – when you feel ready for it.



PASSAGE 15

Hetty walked hastily across the short space of pleasure ground which she had to traverse, dreading to meet Mr. Craig, to whom she could hardly have spoken civilly. How relieved she was when she had got safely under the oaks and among the fern of the Chase! Even then she was as ready to be startled as the deer that leaped away at her approach. She thought
5 nothing of the evening light that lay gently in the grassy alleys between the fern, and made the beauty of their living green more visible than it had been in the overpowering flood of noon: she thought of nothing that was present. She only saw something that was possible: Mr. Arthur Donnithorne coming to meet her again along the Fir-tree Grove. That was the foreground of Hetty's picture; behind it lay a bright hazy something – days that were not to
10 be as the other days of her life had been. It was as if she had been wooed by a river-god, who might any time take her to his wondrous halls below a watery heaven. There was no knowing what would come, since this strange entrancing delight had come. If a chest full of lace and satin and jewels had been sent her from some unknown source, how could she but have thought that her whole lot was going to change, and that to-morrow some still more
15 bewildering joy would befall her? Hetty had never read a novel; if she had ever seen one, I think the words would have been too hard for her; how then could she find a shape for her expectations? They were as formless as the sweet languid odours of the garden at the Chase, which had floated past her as she walked by the gate.

She is at another gate now – that leading into Fir-tree Grove. She enters the wood, where
20 it is already twilight, and at every step she takes, the fear at her heart becomes colder. If he should not come! Oh, how dreary it was – the thought of going out at the other end of the wood, into the unsheltered road, without having seen him. She reaches the first turning towards the Hermitage, walking slowly – he is not there. She hates the leveret that runs across the path; she hates everything that is not what she longs for. She walks on, happy
25 whenever she is coming to a bend in the road, for perhaps he is behind it. No. She is beginning to cry: her heart has swelled so, the tears stand in her eyes; she gives one great sob, while the corners of her mouth quiver, and the tears roll down.

She doesn't know that there is another turning to the Hermitage, that she is close against it, and that Arthur Donnithorne is only a few yards from her, full of one thought, and a
30 thought of which she only is the object. He is going to see Hetty again: that is the longing which has been growing through the last three hours to a feverish thirst. Not, of course, to speak in the caressing way into which he had unguardedly fallen before dinner, but to set things right with her by a kindness which would have the air of friendly civility, and prevent her from running away with wrong notions about their mutual relation.

35 If Hetty had known he was there, she would not have cried; and it would have been better, for then Arthur would perhaps have behaved as wisely as he had intended. As it was, she started when he appeared at the end of the side-alley, and looked up at him with two great drops rolling down her cheeks. What else could he do but speak to her in a soft, soothing tone, as if she were a bright-eyed spaniel with a thorn in her foot?

Adam Bede, George Eliot

1. What impression do we get of Hetty's character and of Arthur's feelings towards her?
2. How does the writer make use of the setting in which this episode takes place?
3. How do the similes in the passage add to our understanding of what is happening?
4. By what means does the writer convey a sense of drama?

Part 8: Writing Your Commentary

By now you should feel that you have learnt to read in new ways and for special purposes; and that you've mastered the technique of making notes on what you've read, using one number system or the other – or neither, if you feel confident doing it your own way.

Here you are in the exam room then, with a pretty good grasp of the poem or piece of prose you've just read several times. You have made notes in the margin of the exam paper, relating either to the guiding questions or to the passage's five aspects (*SCASI*).

If you're working with guiding questions, answer them one by one. If you have been asked to produce a continuous commentary based on the questions, try to link your answers. You may be able to do that by:

- o using the last point you make in one answer as a starting point for your next answer
- o noting the fact that a quotation from the passage which helps you answer one question is also relevant to another
- o giving an overview of the passage at the end of your commentary, in which you say what you have found really unusual or powerful about it and mention (briefly) again some of the most important things you have noted earlier.

If you have no guiding questions, well...here's the hard choice you have to make.

You can put all of your trust in the 1-5 system and write a paragraph about each of the passage's elements in turn. Your commentary will look like this:

Paragraph 1: Introduction, in which you say *as briefly as possible* what the passage's 'subject matter' is.

Examples of introductory paragraphs:

PASSAGE 4 *'My Father's Garden'*: 'David Wagoner tells us how his father proudly brought home things from a scrapyard to make into toys for his children.'

PASSAGE 5 *'The Way We Live Now'*: 'This passage is about the attempts of a young woman to resist her domineering father.'

PASSAGE 8 *'The Interrogation'*: 'The poem describes an incident in which travellers are caught by an army patrol and interrogated.'

PASSAGE 9 *Source Unknown*: 'A woman faces a difficult choice.'

PASSAGE 12 *'Heritage'*: 'This is a poem about the early stirrings of Womanhood in a young girl.'

Try writing an introductory paragraph for one or more of the other passages.

Paragraph 2: *Setting*

Paragraph 3: *Character...*

...and so on. (Don't use headings)

Here's the alternative – simpler in some ways.

Expand your introductory paragraph so that you give a general idea of what the passage is about – what its central idea, or purpose, or impact is. In other words say the most important single thing you can about the passage.

Then begin with line 1 and work your way down the piece of writing, pointing out everything significant and relating it as far as you can to what you've said in your introduction about what the 'heart' of the passage is. (You'll be surprised by how much of the passage's detail does connect with its central core – that's what we call 'tight' writing...but don't ignore something interesting just because you can't make it fit.)

The structure of your commentary will now depend on the structure of the passage. If it's a poem you can write one paragraph about each verse. If it's a piece of prose you can write about each of *its* paragraphs in turn...and if it tells a story you can write a paragraph about each part of the incident, as follows.

Example of the breakdown of an incident into its parts (*The Way We Live Now* page 19):

- o Marie's initial refusal to do what her father wants
- o Her father's anger and the way he hides it
- o Her mother's shriek
- o Her father's further tactics
- o Marie's challenge to what he has said
- o Melmotte's struggle to contain his fury and his attempt to alarm her
- o Marie's counter-attack
- o Her final refusal

This may mean your paragraphs are of very different lengths. That doesn't matter.

The advantage of working line-by-line is that you'll find it easier to do something which is very necessary when you're writing a commentary – look under every stone to see what's interesting. You really must consider each line, each word, each punctuation mark even, no matter how ordinary it seems, to see what contribution it may be making to the passage and to the writer's purpose. 'Why did he write that?' must be your constant question.

The disadvantage of writing your commentary in that way is that you may find it more difficult to come to general critical conclusions about the passage. You will also find it harder to point out connections between its details without doing a lot of jumping around. If there are several references to weapons and battle scattered through the piece, for instance, you're going to be writing about 'images of war' every time you come across an example. It would be better to set aside a separate paragraph for the effect of the war imagery in the passage as a whole – which you could only do if you were using the *SCASI* structure.

Whichever format you use, do try to save one 'blockbuster' idea for your conclusion. Ideally it will show that you have seen something really special in the passage, and that this piece of writing has had an impact on you. Even better, it may make the examiner himself or herself see the passage in a new light.

Some Other Tips

- o If you have a choice of passage, don't automatically choose the one which is easier to understand – there may be less to say about it.

- o If, when you've made notes on the passage you've chosen, you feel to be getting nowhere, consider changing to the other passage. You shouldn't do so, however, after anything more than say ten minutes: stick with your original choice, and you'll find that more ideas come once you start writing.
- o You've read the passage several times, but you still aren't wholly sure that you've grasped its central meaning (this is more likely to happen with a poem). You don't have guiding questions to help you...so you hardly dare start to write in case you 'get it wrong'. Emergency procedure: start with what you do know (details of the setting, then the characters etc) and trust that your grasp of what the whole thing 'means' will grow as you work. But you should leave the first half-dozen lines of your answer page blank. Then if you do come to a fuller understanding of what the passage is about, overall, you can return and add in an introductory paragraph. If you don't get round to doing that, well the examiner will never know why you left the space, will he?
- o What you will not have time to do is write your commentary in draft form and then copy it out again. So write carefully.
- o Quotations and examples: In theory, every point you make should be supported by a piece of evidence. That could become a bit pedestrian after a while (one heavy footfall after another) and interrupt the flow of what you're saying. So be sensible about it: make sure at least that you're illustrating your major points by reference to the text.
- o Keep your quotations brief. If you need to refer to a longer section, give the beginning and the end, joined by a few full-stops.
- o We've given line references for the quotations we've used in this Help Book. There's no need for you to do that in your commentary – the examiner will know where things are
- o Don't use a long word if a short one will do.
- o Don't write a long sentence if you can say the same thing in a short one...or two short ones.
- o Don't use slang. You may find the man (or the woman) in the Source Unknown passage wacky but there are more precise ways of describing their unusual behaviour.
- o Don't pass judgement on the behaviour of the people in the passage. Maybe Melmotte *should* have his backside kicked because of the way he treats his daughter, and maybe Miss Pringle (the teacher in the passage from *Free Fall*) *should* be fired...but it's not your job to say that.
- o Base any comments about how good (or bad) a piece of writing is on literary, not personal, criteria – don't say, for instance, that you particularly enjoyed a poem about a cat because you like cats, or that a war poem is a bad poem because you disagree with war.
- o Avoid vague or excessive praise ('This magnificent piece of writing demonstrates why Dickens is a world-famous author.')



Practice in writing a full commentary

Here's the prose passage from a past exam, with guiding questions.

If you will be given guiding questions in your own exam, answer the questions here.

If you will have to write your commentary without the help of guiding questions ignore these ones until you've made your (1-5?) notes on the passage, then look at the questions to make sure you haven't missed anything the examiner thinks you should be writing about.

Then write your commentary.

Check how long you spend and compare that with how much time you will be given in the exam.

PASSAGE 16

In one of the rows of desks for two – blackened, ink-scored, dusty desks, with eternally dry ink-wells – sat Laura and Tilly, behind them Inez and Bertha. The cheeks of the four were flushed. But, while the others only whispered and wondered, Laura was on the tiptoe of expectation. She could not get her breath properly, and her hands and feet were cold. Twisting
5 her fingers in and out, she moistened her lips with her tongue. – When, oh when would it begin?

These few foregoing minutes were the most trying of any. For when, in an ominous hush, Mr Strachey entered and strode to his desk, Laura suddenly grew calm, and could take note of everything that passed.

10 The Principal raised his hand, to enjoin a silence that was already absolute.
'Will Miss Johns stand up!'

At these words, spoken in a low, impressive tone, Bertha burst into tears and hid her face in her handkerchief. Hundreds of eyes sought the unhappy culprit as she rose, then to be cast down and remain glued to the floor.

15 The girl stood, pale and silly-looking, and stared at Mr Strachey much as a rabbit stares at the snake that is about to eat it. She was a very ugly girl of fourteen, with a pasty face and lank hair that dangled to her shoulders. Her mouth had fallen half open through fear, and she did not shut it all the time she was on view.

Laura could not take her eyes off the scene: they travelled, burning with curiosity, from Annie to Mr Strachey, and back again to the miserable thief. When, after a few introductory remarks on
20 crime in general, the Principal passed on to the present case, and described it in detail, Laura was fascinated by his oratory, and gazed full at him. He made it all live vividly before her; she hung on his lips, appreciating his points, the skilful way in which he worked up his climaxes. But then, she herself knew what it was to be poor – as Annie Johns had been. She understood what it would mean to lack your tram-fare on a rainy morning – according to Mr Strachey this was the
25 motor impulse of the thefts – because a lolly-shop stretched out its octopus arms after you. She could imagine too, with a shiver, how easy it would be, the loss of the first pennies having remained undiscovered, to go on to threepenny-bits, and from these to sixpences. More particularly, since the money had been taken, without exception, from pockets in which there was plenty. Not, Laura felt sure, in order to avoid detection, as Mr Strachey supposed, but
30 because to those who had so much a few odd coins could not matter. She wondered if every one else agreed with him on this point. How did the teachers feel about it? – and she ran her eyes

over the row, to learn their opinion from their faces.

Henry Handel Richardson, from *The Getting of Wisdom* (1910)

What impression do we get of Annie Johns?

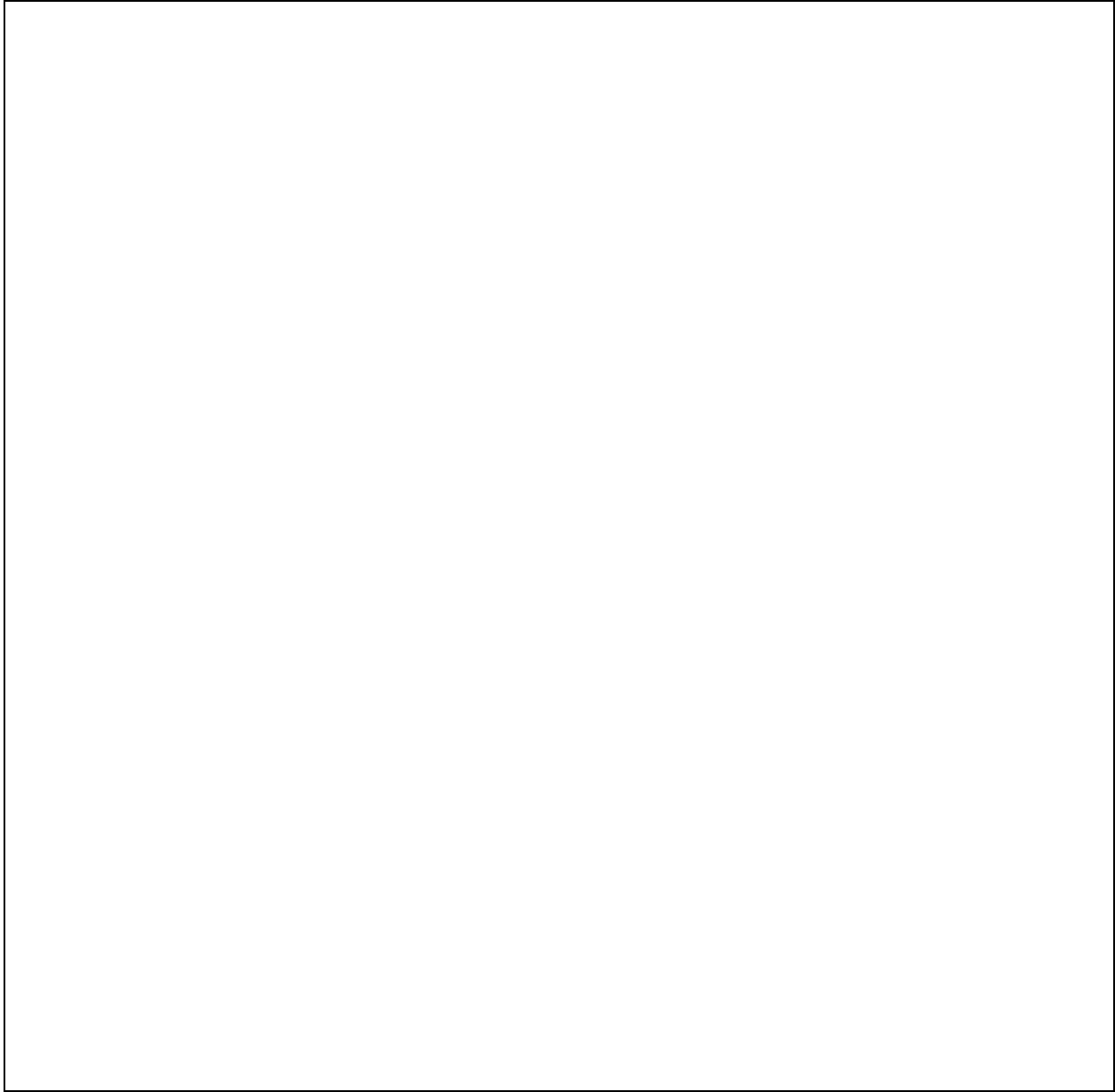
What does the author want us to note about the Mr Strachey's behaviour and character?

Analyse the suspensefulness of the passage

Show how the style of the passage contributes to its overall effect.

When you've completed your commentary, with or without the use of the guiding questions, you may like to tick, on the list in Box 79 in the Answers Booklet, the details you have referred to. They are grouped according to the four questions, with an additional section – further ideas you could have included in a 'free' commentary.

(See Box 79 in the Answers Booklet)



Don't worry if you missed some of that. More practice will help. You should find it reassuring that there is so much to be said about what is a comparatively straightforward piece of writing.



Section Two: Higher Level Passages

These are more complex passages from previous exams. If you think they will take you beyond where you need to be you can miss out this section and go straight to the practice passages in Section Three.

There are five passages here (two poems and two prose extracts and a fifth passage that's a mixture of the two just to make a point). The most effective way to use this part of the book would be to tackle one passage a week (say), setting aside two hours to write the commentary at one sitting – in conditions as near as possible to those of an exam room (an upright chair at a table, no music and no interruptions...but chocolate's ok).

Then take a break before you check what you've written against the notes which follow each passage.

If you're in a hurry (that Maths project and your Art portfolio are both due...the exam's only a couple of months away...or it's next week) then some compromises are possible:

- o Don't tackle all five passages.
- o If you're less confident about poetry, work only on the poems (same for prose)
- o Don't write full commentaries – just make notes
- o Don't even make notes: just read each passage a few times and look at its 'Help' box.

As an alternative to working on your own, consider having some sharing sessions with a friend or two, where you read a passage together and plan what you would write about it. Sometimes friends are the best source of help.

Each of the passages below is particularly strong in one **SCASI** area...but of course in a free commentary you'd be expected to note pretty well everything of interest.

Just to give you bit of a boost we're returning first of all to a passage we looked at much earlier – from *The Moonstone* by Wilkie Collins. You'll remember that it was a Higher Level passage, and in Section One (page 10) we concentrated on its setting. There was much more to be said about its other aspects than we had time for first time around, however, so it will be a useful starting point for your Higher Level practice. Write a commentary on it, following the guidelines we've just given (about conditions etc) – but you can if you like pretend that you've already written the section on **Setting**, and shorten the time by twenty minutes or so.

Here's the passage again.

PASSAGE 3

Our house is high up on the Yorkshire coast, and close by the sea. We have got beautiful walks all round us, in every direction but one. That one I acknowledge to be a horrid walk. It leads, for a quarter of a mile, through a melancholy plantation of firs, and brings you out between low cliffs on the loneliest and ugliest little bay on all our coast.

- 5 The sand-hills here run down to the sea, and end in two spits of rock jutting out opposite each other, till you lose sight of them in the water. One is called the North Spit, and one the South. Between the two, shifting backwards and forwards at certain seasons of the year, lies the most horrible quicksand on the shores of Yorkshire. At the turn of the tide, something goes on in the unknown deeps below, which sets the whole face of the quicksand shivering and trembling in a

10 manner most remarkable to see, and which has given to it, among the people in our parts, the name of
The Shivering Sand. A great bank, half a mile out, nigh the mouth of the bay, breaks the force of the
main ocean coming in from the offing¹. Winter and summer, when the tide flows over the quicksand,
the sea seems to leave the waves behind it on the bank, and rolls its waters in smoothly with a heave,
and covers the sand in silence. A lonesome and horrid retreat, I can tell you! No boat ever ventures
15 into this bay. No children from our fishing-village, called Cobb's Hole, ever come here to play. The
very birds of the air, as it seems to me, give the Shivering Sand a wide berth. That a young woman,
with dozens of nice walks to choose from, and company to go with her, if she only said 'Come!'
should prefer this place, and should sit and work² or read in it, all alone, when it's her turn out, I grant
you, passes belief. It's true, nevertheless, account for it as you may, that this was Rosanna
20 Spearman's favourite walk, except when she went once or twice to Cobb's Hole, to see the only
friend she had in our neighbourhood, of whom more anon. It's also true that I was now setting out for
this same place, to fetch the girl in to dinner, which brings us round happily to our former point, and
starts us fair again on our way to the sands.

I saw no sign of the girl in the plantation. When I got out, through the sand-hills, onto the beach,
25 there she was in her little straw bonnet, and her plain grey cloak that she always wore to hide her
deformed shoulder as much as might be – there she was, all alone, looking out on the quicksand and
the sea.

She started when I came up with her, and turned her head away from me. Not looking me in the
face being another of the proceedings which, as head of the servants, I never allow, on principle, to
30 pass without inquiry – I turned her round my way, and saw that she was crying. My bandanna
handkerchief – one of six beauties given me by my lady – was handy in my pocket. I took it out, and I
said to Rosanna, 'Come and sit down, my dear, on the slope of the beach along, with me. I'll dry your
eyes. I'll dry your eyes for you first, and then I'll make so bold as to ask what you have been crying
about.'

35 When you come to my age, you will find sitting down on the slope of a beach a much longer job
than you think it now. By the time I was settled, Rosanna had dried her own eyes with a very inferior
handkerchief to mine – cheap cambric. She looked very quiet, and very wretched; but she sat down by
me like a good girl, when I told her. When you want to comfort a woman by the shortest way, take
her on your knee. I thought of this golden rule. But there! Rosanna wasn't Nancy, and that's the truth
40 of it!

'Now, tell me, my dear,' I said, 'what are you crying about?'

'About the years that are gone, Mr Betteredge,' says Rosanna quietly. 'My past life still comes
back to me sometimes.'

'Come, come, my good girl,' I said, 'your past life is all sponged out. Why can't you forget it?'

45 She took me by one of the lappets³ of my coat. I am a slovenly old man, and a good deal of my
meat and drink gets splashed on my clothes. Sometimes one of the women, and sometimes another,
cleans me of my grease. The day before, Rosanna had taken out a spot for me on the lappet of my
coat, with a new composition, warranted to remove anything. The grease was gone, but there was a
little dull place left on the nap of the cloth where the grease had been. The girl pointed to that place
50 and shook her head.

'The stain is taken off,' she said. 'But the place shows, Mr Betteredge – the place shows!'

from Wilkie Collins *The Moonstone* (1868), Chapter 4

¹ a position in the sea some distance from shore

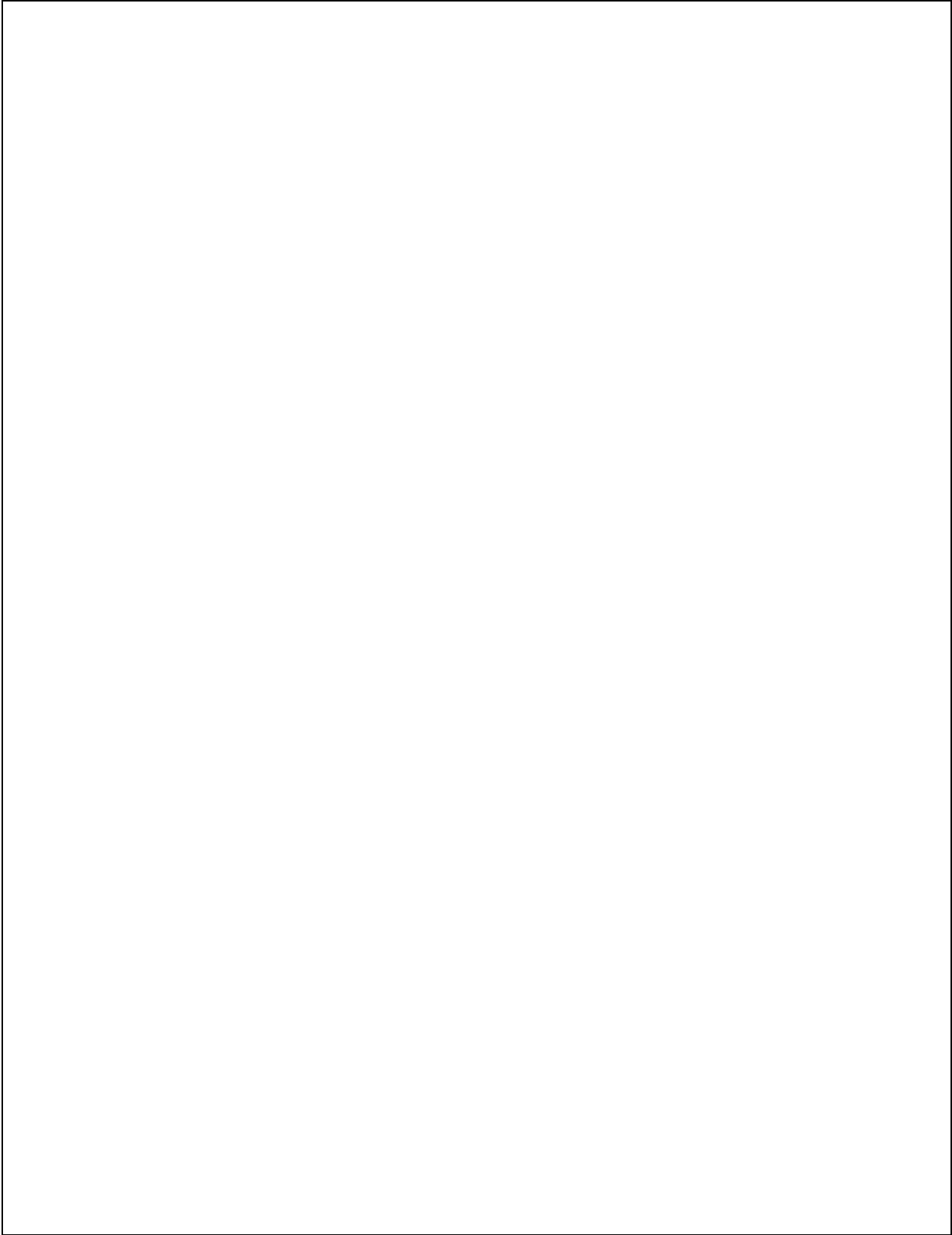
² sew, embroider, or the like

³ lapels

In Box 80 in the Answers Booklet are some of the things you could have mentioned in a free commentary. Bear in mind, however, that you wouldn't be expected to note them all – you would run out of time.

The notes are organised according to the *SCASI* system (minus *Setting*, on this occasion). If you wrote your commentary line-by-line you can still look through the box to see what you might have missed. (But you'll notice that you would have had some difficulty in pulling together examples of the same thing from different parts of the passage. It's important, if you are working line-by-line, to pause every now and then and point out connections or make an 'overview' statement.)

(See Box 80 in the Answers Booklet)



Now write a commentary on the fine poem which follows. It's quite a difficult poem – not in its central idea, which is straightforward enough (it's about a boy's resentment of his father), but in its detail. General advice: when you hit an obscure word or phrase or idea, make an intelligent guess at its meaning, one which fits the context. Be imaginative but not fanciful. Then move on.

PASSAGE 17

My Father

For being so black
so muscular so well curved
like a groomed show man
too fit everyday for barefoot
5 he made us boys feel
we could kill him

For laughing so deep
down notes from soprano
like a tied stallion sighting
10 a pan of water
he got all laughter stopped
to listen to him

For treating ticks
like berries gathering
15 and the half dead cow
in a bath of herbs and oil
he sat all day in tall grass
sweet-talking weak jaws

For tipping out warm pockets
20 of sticky sugar plums
or sat-on bananas
or squashed up naseberries
he made children descend
on him for things past ripe

25 For expecting my mother
to make money like food

and clothes and be the sum
of every question
he made us go deadfaced
30 when he stayed in

For drawing his name 'X'
and carrying a locked head
to explain stars
like a treetop pointing
35 he made us acknowledge him
keenly in rage

James Berry, from *Melanthika* (1975)

See Box 81 in the Answers Booklet. We haven't analysed the poem in full there, we've just pointed up some of the really unusual and effective things about it.



PASSAGE 18

Then one day, quite suddenly, on her return from a ride at Fort William, Nancy had been sent, with her governess, who had a white face, right down South to that convent school. She had been expecting to go there in two months' time. Her mother disappeared from her life at that time. A fortnight later Leonora came to the convent and told her that her mother was dead. Perhaps she was. At any rate, I never heard until the very end what became of Mrs Rufford. Leonora never spoke of her.

And then Major Rufford went to India, from which he returned very seldom and only for very short visits; and Nancy lived herself gradually into the life at Branshaw Teleragh. I think that, from that time onwards, she led a very happy life, till the end. There were dogs and horses and old servants and the Forest. And there were Edward and Leonora, who loved her.

I had known her all the time – I mean, that she always came to the Ashburnhams' at Nauheim for the last fortnight of their stay – and I watched her gradually growing. She was very cheerful with me. She always even kissed me, night and morning, until she was about eighteen. And she would skip about and fetch me things and laugh at my tales of life in Philadelphia. But, beneath her gaiety, I fancy that there lurked some terrors.

I remember one day, when she was just eighteen, during one of her father's rare visits to Europe, we were sitting in the gardens, near the iron-stained fountain. You have no idea how beautiful Nancy looked that morning.

We were talking about the desirability of taking tickets in lotteries – of the moral side of it, I mean. She was all in white, and so tall and fragile; and she had only just put her hair up, so that the carriage of her neck had that charming touch of youth and of unfamiliarity. Over her throat there played the reflection from a little pool of water, left by a thunderstorm of the night before, and all the rest of her features were in the diffused and luminous shade of her white parasol. Her dark hair just showed beneath her broad white hat of pierced, chip straw; her throat was very long and leaned forward, and her eyebrows, arching a little as she laughed at some old-fashionedness in my phraseology, had abandoned their tense line. And there was a little colour in her cheeks and light in her deep blue eyes. And to think that that vivid white thing, that saintly and, swan-like being – to think that...Why, she was like the sail of a ship, so white and so definite in her movements. And to think that she will never...Why, she will never do anything again. I can't believe it...

Anyhow, we were chattering away about the morality of lotteries. And then, suddenly, there came from the arcades behind us the overtones of her father's unmistakable voice; it was as if a modified foghorn had boomed with a reed inside it. I looked round to catch sight of him. A tall, fair, stiffly upright man of fifty, he was walking away with an Italian baron who had had much to do with the Belgian Congo. They must have been talking about the proper treatment of natives, for I heard him say:

'Oh, hang humanity!'

When I looked again at Nancy her eyes were closed and her face was more pallid than her dress, which had at least some pinkish reflections from the gravel. It was dreadful to see her with her eyes closed like that.

'Oh!' she exclaimed, and her hand that had appeared to be groping, settled for a moment on my arm. 'Never speak of it. Promise never to tell my father of it. It brings back those dreadful dreams...' And, when she opened her eyes she looked straight into mine. 'The blessed saints,' she said, 'you would think they would spare you such things. I don't believe all the sinning in the world could make one deserve them.'

Ford Madox Ford, *The Good Soldier* (1927)

(See Box 82 in the Answers Booklet)

PASSAGE 19

We are talking now of summer evenings in Knoxville, Tennessee, in the time that I lived there so successfully disguised to myself as a child. It was a little bit mixed sort of block, fairly solidly lower middle class, with one or two juts apiece on either side of
5 that. The houses corresponded: middle-sized gracefully fretted wood houses built in the late nineties and early nineteen hundreds, with small front and side and more spacious back yards, and trees in the yards, and porches. These were softwooded trees, poplars, tulip trees, cottonwoods. There were fences around one or two of the houses, but mainly the yards ran into each other with only now and then a low hedge that wasn't doing very
10 well. There were few good friends among the grown people, and they were not poor enough for the other sort of intimate acquaintance, but everyone nodded and spoke, and even might talk short times, trivially, and at the two extremes of the general or the particular, and ordinarily nextdoor neighbors talked quite a bit when they happened to run into each other, and never paid calls.

15 But it is of these evenings, I speak.

People go by; things go by. A horse, drawing a buggy, breaking his hollow iron music on the asphalt; a loud auto; a quiet auto; people in pairs, not in a hurry, scuffling, switching their weight of aestival^l body, talking casually, the taste hovering over them of vanilla, strawberry, pasteboard and starched milk, the image upon them of lovers and

20 horsemen, squared with clowns in hueless amber. A street car raising its iron moan; stopping, belling and starting; stertorous; rousing and raising again its iron increasing moan and swimming its gold windows and straw seats on past and past and past, the bleak spark crackling and cursing above it like a small malignant spirit set to dog its tracks; the iron whine rises on rising speed; still risen, faints; halts, the faint stinging bell; rises again, still fainter; fainting, lifting, lifts, faints forgone; forgotten. Now is the night one blue dew.

Now is the night one blue dew, my father has drained, he has coiled the hose.
Low on the length of lawns, a frailing of fire who breathes.
30 Content, silver, like peeps of light, each cricket makes his comment over and over in the drowned grass,
A cold toad thumpily flounders.
Parents on porches: rock and rock: From damp strings morning glories: hang their ancient faces.

35 On the rough wet grass of the back yard my father and mother have spread quilts. All my people are larger bodies than mine, quiet, with voices gentle and meaningless like the voices of sleeping birds. One is an artist, he is living at home. One is a musician, she is living at home. One is my mother who is good to me. One is my father who is good to me. By some chance, here they are, all on this earth; and who shall ever tell the sorrow
40 of being on this earth, lying, on quilts, on the grass, in a summer evening, among the sounds of the night.

After a little, I am taken in and put to bed. Sleep, soft smiling, draws me unto her: and those receive me, who quietly treat me, as one familiar and well-beloved in that home; but will not, oh, will not, not now, not ever; but will not ever tell me who I am.

James Agee, *A Death in the Family* (1957)

*I*_{aestival}: summertime

Either in your note-making on this passage or in the commentary itself (whichever structure you've used for that) you will probably have developed some lists. There are three notable groups of detail, each associated with one of the passage's main **SCASI** aspects. Check that somewhere you have covered most of what you'll find in Box 83 in the Answers Booklet.

(See Box 83 in the Answers Booklet)

Have you managed to draw all of that together into a statement of the passage's essence? Try the one in Box 84 of the Answers Booklet for comparison.

(See Box 84 in the Answers Booklet)



PASSAGE 20

Entirely

If we could get the hang of it entirely
It would take too long;
All we know is the splash of words in passing
And falling twigs of song,
5 And when we try to eavesdrop on the great
Presences it is rarely
That by a stroke of luck we can appropriate
Even a phrase entirely.

If we could find our happiness entirely
10 In somebody else's arms
We should not fear the spears of the spring nor the city's
Yammering fire alarms
But, as it is, the spears each year go through

Our flesh and almost hourly
15 Bell or siren banishes the blue
Eyes of Love entirely.

And if the world were black or white entirely
And all the charts were plain
Instead of a mad weir of tigerish waters,
20 A prism of delight and pain,
We might be surer where we wished to go
Or again we might be merely
Bored but in brute reality there is no
Road that is right entirely.

Louis MacNeice, *Plant and Phantom* (1941)

It won't be surprising if you've had to struggle to use the **SCASI** system for this poem: it's what you might call a 'conventional' poem, and its weight lies almost wholly in its central idea and the techniques by which that is expressed. If you have persevered you will probably have made some modifications:

Setting here is not a particular place, but the whole world as the poet sees it.

The only **Characters** in the poem are people in general ('*we*') and the poet himself.

The **Action** of the poem lies only in life's day-to-day progress.

There's something to be said about all of those, however, even in their modified and vague form.

Most of your commentary will have focused therefore on the poem's **Style** and **Ideas**.

Louis MacNeice has made things easy for us by stating his central idea simply, and stating it, moreover, three times, in modified form – once in each verse. How close has your understanding of each verse come to what we note in Box 85 of the Answers Booklet?

(See Box 85 in the Answers Booklet)

The overall idea of the poem, then, is something like: 'We need to learn to live with, and even be grateful for, life's uncertainties.'

That's not a particularly original thought, is it? So once more we're left with the question of what makes a poem powerful, even when its 'message' is plain and simple.

The answer must lie, here, in the fact that it's almost three poems – each verse could stand alone. Each verse, however, also makes a contribution to the forward movement of the whole, so that we have a sense

of the poem going somewhere, reaching some kind of conclusion, if not climax. The last two lines are pretty firm, aren't they?

So the effect of the poem rests largely in its form, its overall structure (which is really part of its *Style* as we have defined it). Think of the verses as transparencies, each one overlaying the one before and adding to it. Overlays have to be aligned, however; and the alignment of each verse comes from its metre and rhyme-scheme, which form a sort of template. Look back and see how much attention you've given to those things in your commentary. If you've ignored them, try analysing them now and make some notes. What you will probably notice, if you haven't done so already, is that this repetition and build-up are what create the poem's music; and it is the music which largely carries the message to us.

Its music – and its imagery. Have you written extensively about the poem's images? You could have noted its principal dependence on nature imagery (MacNeice is after all writing about 'the way the world is')...but there's also a group of images which deal with Man's attempts to control the world's forces (fire alarms) and understand its truths (eavesdropping, charts).

How have you described the (language) style of the poem? As colloquial? Informal? Have you quoted the casual phrases like '*get the hang of it*', and '*by a stroke of luck*'? Compare it with the *Childe Harold* extract (page 43), which dealt with similarly fundamental features of our relationship with the world. What a difference!

In our discussion of Byron's style, however, we noted how appropriate it was to the weightiness of the subject matter. How can we now argue that a less grand style works well in '*Entirely*', when its subject matter is just as weighty?

The answer lies in the difference between the two poets' moods and intentions. Byron is agitated about the way we treat the world and wants us to be agitated too. MacNeice on the other hand is counselling acceptance of the way things are: he wants us to be *relaxed* about life's uncertainties...and his style is therefore relaxed. If you've come across the idea that a poem's form (and style) are the same thing as its meaning ('a poem is a poem is a poem') and have had trouble understanding the concept...well, here it is in action. What MacNeice is saying is how he says it.

Don't, whatever you do, feel you've 'got it all wrong' if your interpretation of this or any poem differs from what turns out later to be a more standard reading – or if you get into an argument with the rest of the class or your teacher about what a poem is about. Listen carefully to what others say and be ready, of course, to change your mind; but remember too that there is no answer that is right entirely!



Section Three: Passages for Further Practice

These are taken from a variety of sources other than past exam papers. So that you can work unaided if you wish, the guiding questions are not attached to the passages themselves but are to be found at the end of this section.

The passages themselves are of varied difficulty. Some are quite short and may take you less than the full length of time.

PASSAGE 21

Auntie lies in the rest home with a feeding tube and a bedpan, she weighs nothing, she fidgets and shakes, and all I can see are her knotted hands and the carbon facets of her eyes, she was famous for her pies and her kindness to neighbors, but if it is true that every hat exhibits a drama the psyche wishes it could perform, what was my aunt saying all the years of my
5 childhood when she squeezed into cars with those too tall hats, those pineapples and colored cockades¹, my aunt who told me I should travel slowly or I would see too much before I died, wore spires and steeples, tulle² toques². The velvet inkpots of Schiaparelli, the mousseline de
10 soie³ of Lilly Dache have disappeared into the world, leaving behind one flesh-colored box, *Worth* stenciled on the top, a coral velvet cloche⁴ inside with matching veil and drawstring
bag, and what am I to make of these Dolores del Rio size 4 black satin wedgies with
constellations of spangles on the bridge. Before she climbed into the white boat of the nursing
home and sailed away--talking every day to family in heaven, calling them through the
sprinkling system--my aunt said she was pushing her cart through the grocery when she saw
15 young girls at the end of an aisle pointing at her, her dowager's hump, her familial tremors.
Auntie, who claimed that ninety pounds was her fighting weight, carried her head high,
hooded, turbaned, jeweled, her neck straight under pounds of roots and vegetables that
shimmied when she walked. Surely this is not the place of women in our world, that when we
are old and curled like crustaceans, young girls will laugh at us, point their fingers, run as fast
as they can in the opposite direction.

from *Except By Nature*, Sandra Alcosser

¹cockades: bonnets with rosettes or ribbons attached; ²tulle toques: silk caps

³mousseline de soie: thin silk, like muslin ⁴cloche: bell-shaped hat

PASSAGE 22

The Tourist from Syracuse

One of those men who can be a car salesman
or a tourist from Syracuse or a hired assassin.

John D. MacDonald

You would not recognize me.
Mine is the face which blooms in
The dank mirrors of washrooms
As you grope for the light switch.

5 My eyes have the expression
Of the cold eyes of statues
Watching their pigeons return
From the feed you have scattered,

10 And I stand on my corner
With the same marble patience.
If I move at all, it is
At the same pace precisely

15 As the shade of the awning
Under which I stand waiting
And with whose blackness it seems
I am already blended.

20 I speak seldom, and always
In a murmur as quiet
As that of crowds which surround
The victims of accidents.

Shall I confess who I am?
My name is all names, or none.
I am the used-car salesman,
The tourist from Syracuse,

25 The hired assassin, waiting.
I will stand here forever
Like one who has missed his bus –
Familiar, anonymous –

30 On my usual corner,
The corner at which you turn
To approach that place where now
You must not hope to arrive.

Donald Justice

PASSAGE 23

The Voice

Woman much missed, how you call to me, call to me,
Saying that now you are not as you were
When you have changed from the one who was all to me,
But as at first, when our day was fair.

5 Can it be you that I hear? Let me view you, then,
Standing as when I drew near to the town
Where you would wait for me: yes, as I knew you then,
Even to the original air-blue gown!

Or is it only the breeze, in its listlessness
10 Travelling across the wet mead to me here,
You ever being dissolved to wan wistfulness,
Heard no more again far or near?

Thus I: faltering forward,
Leaves around me falling,
15 Wind oozing thin through the thorn from norward,
And the woman calling.

Thomas Hardy

PASSAGE 24

...At the end of this tirade, the peasant rose and stolidly beat the horse with a long string fastened to a stick, shouting hoarsely: 'Ugh! Eeagh! Augh!' The horses awoke, sighed, and moved experimentally – by some mechanical miracle the wheels turned, a shudder ran along our keel, and we were off!

5 Across the bridge into Austrian Novo Sielitza we rattled, and out upon the hard road that led frontward, slowly gaining upon and passing a long train of ox-carts driven by soldiers and loaded with cases of ammunition. Now we were in Bucovina. On the left, low fields green with young crops stretched flatly to the trees along the Prut, beyond which rose the rich hills of Romania; to the right the valley extended miles to cultivated rolling country. Already the
10 June sun poured down windless, moist heat. The driver slumped gradually into his spine, the horses' pace diminished to a merely arithmetical progression, and we crawled in a baking pall of dust like Zeus hidden in his cloud.

'Hey!' We beat upon his back. 'Shake a leg, Dave!'

15 He turned upon us a dirty, snub-nosed face, and eyes peering through matted hair, and his mouth cracked slowly in an appalling, familiar grin with the intelligent expression of a loaf of bread. We christened him immediately Ivan the Horrible...

'Ooch!' he cried with simulated ferocity, waving the string. 'Aich! Augh!'

The horses pretended to be impressed, and broke into a shuffle; but ten minutes later Ivan was again rapt in contemplation of the infinite, the horses almost stationary, and we moved in

20 white dust...

Slowly we drew near the leisurely sound of the cannon, that defined itself sharply out of the all-echoing thunder audible at Novo Sielitza. And topping a steep hill crowned with a stragglng thatched village, we came in sight of the batteries. They lay on the hither side of an immense rolling hill, where a red gash in the fields dribbled along for miles. At intervals of
25 half a minute a gun spat heavily; but you could see neither smoke nor flame – only minute figures running about, stiffening, and again springing to life. A twanging drone as the shell soared – and then on the leafy hills across the river puffs of smoke unfolding. Over there were the towers of white Czernowitz, dazzling in the sun. The village through which we passed was populous with great brown soldiers, who eyed us sullenly and suspiciously. Over a gateway
30 hung a Red Cross flag, and along the road trickled a thin, steady stream of wounded – some leaning on their comrades, others bandaged around the head, or with their arms in slings; and peasant carts jolted by with faintly groaning heaps of arms and legs.

From *The War in Eastern Europe*, John Reed (1887-1920)

PASSAGE 25

Adolescence – II

Although it is night, I sit in the bathroom, waiting.
5 Sweat prickles behind my knees, the baby-breasts are alert.
Venetian blinds slice up the moon; the tiles quiver in pale strips.
Then they come, the three seal men with eyes as round
As dinner plates and eyelashes like sharpened tines¹.
They bring the scent of licorice. One sits in the washbowl,
10 One on the bathtub edge; one leans against the door.
'Can you feel it yet?' they whisper.
I don't know what to say, again. They chuckle,
Patting their sleek bodies with their hands.
'Well, maybe next time.' And they rise,
15 Glittering like pools of ink under moonlight,
And vanish. I clutch at the ragged holes
They leave behind, here at the edge of darkness.
Night rests like a ball of fur on my tongue.

Rita Dove

¹ Tines: Prongs

PASSAGE 26

from The Feast of Stephen

I

The coltish horseplay of the locker room,
Moist with the steam of the tiled shower stalls,
With shameless blends of civet, musk and sweat,
Loud with the cap-gun snapping of wet towels
5 Under the steel-ribbed cages of bare bulbs,
In some such setting of thick basement pipes
And janitorial realities
Boys for the first time frankly eye each other,
Inspect each others' bodies at close range,
10 And what they see is not so much another
As a strange, possible version of themselves,
And all the sparring dance, adrenal life,
Tense, jubilant nimbleness, is but a vague,
Busy, unfocused ballet of self-love.

Anthony Hecht

(This is the first verse of a longer poem, and the poet has quite rightly pointed out that it can not be fully understood out of context. It will be a useful exercise for you, once you have written a commentary on these fourteen lines, to read the verse again together with the other three verses of what is altogether a very powerful poem, and ask yourself what that additional reading has added to your understanding of the extract above. The poem is printed in full as Appendix 1, page 168, with some guiding notes.)

PASSAGE 27

Although he had paid a brief visit to Walter by darkness the other evening, it was several weeks since Ehrendorf had last seen the Blacketts' house by daylight. It seemed to him to have a forlorn and deserted air. During the raid on Tanglin a bomb had fallen at one edge of the lawn, uprooting the 'flame of the forest' tree beneath which, several months ago, he had been standing with Joan
5 when she had thrown wine in his face at the garden-party. No effort had been made to fill in the crater on whose raised lip the grass lawn continued peacefully to grow; in the facade of the house itself several of the windows which had once been glazed for the air-conditioning now gaped darkly where once they had sparkled with reflections from the pool.
He plodded past the tennis courts whose white lines, washed out by the monsoon rains and
10 not repainted, were by now scarcely visible. Normally, too, there would have been several Tamils working in the flower-beds or cutting back the *lalang* but today he could not see a soul. He paused to stare uncomprehendingly at an untidy mass of broken spars and tattered paper which stood at the margin of the nutmeg grove and which he failed to recognize as the remains of damaged floats for the jubilee celebrations. Can Walter and Joan have left already? he
15 wondered and, resigned though he already was to the fact that he was unlikely ever to see Joan again, he was nevertheless surprised by the intense and chilling sadness which suddenly enveloped him.

The summer-house, in which the Blacketts in happier times had invited their guests to change their clothes, remained undamaged; Ehrendorf changed rapidly and plunged into the pool which was full of dead leaves and other flotsam. He dived and swam under water for a few feet but the water was murky and disagreeable. How different everything was! Surfacing he bumped into a piece of floating wood on which the words ‘...in Prosperity’ were written. He took a deep breath and dived again; this time he dragged himself on and on through the silent grey corridors, counting the grey tiles on the bottom, inspecting weird grey objects which lay there: a broken flower-pot from which still trailed a slimy grey plant which wavered slightly at his passage, a brick, a rusting metal golf club, a slimy, swollen, disintegrating grey head, horribly merry, which had once belonged to one of the floats and which he also failed to recognize. He would have liked to drag himself on and on through that grey world but his lungs insisted that he should return to the surface. Shaking the water out of his eyes he saw that Joan was walking rapidly towards the pool. Her face was flushed and agitated.

‘Oh, hiya. I hope you don’t mind me using the pool. I didn’t see anyone around. I thought you’d all gone.’ He was aware of an extraordinary stiffness of the muscles of his face as he spoke.

Joan had stopped at the edge of the pool and was gazing down at him with an odd expression on her face, restlessly fingering the turban she was wearing. She ignored his greeting, turned away, looked at her watch, turned back to him. At last she said: ‘You must help me get to the boat. I’ve been trying to ring people but everyone else has gone. There’s only Abdul here and he’s too old ... They say there’s already a terrible traffic jam beginning ... All the ‘boys’ have cleared off, even the kitchen ‘boy’, and Father has gone off somewhere ... and Monty, I don’t know where he is ... Nigel had to go and settle some business at the last moment and I’m to meet him at the boat but unless you help me ... You see, they’ve all gone! Father was supposed to be back ages ago to take me down to the docks himself, but even the *syce* isn’t there and it’s getting late ... Jim, I can’t manage the luggage by myself, d’you see? Oh, go away! You’re completely useless!’ she screamed at Abdul suddenly for the elderly servant had followed her out to the lawn and was rubbing his hands anxiously. Shocked, he fell back a few paces but continued to watch Joan.

Ehrendorf had turned over on to his back and was no longer looking at Joan but straight up at the sky which was cloudy though covered with a white haze. Floating with arms outstretched he thought: ‘From above I must look as if I’m floating like a star-fish ... or perhaps like a piece of flotsam.’ In spite of the water bubbling in his ears he could still hear Joan’s voice, though quite faintly now. He could tell from its pitch that she was panic-stricken. And this was the girl who had refused to help Matthew get Vera away! He said to himself, floating placidly: ‘I wouldn’t help her even if my life depended upon it!’

When he turned over to swim to the side he could no longer hear her voice, but she was still there, kneeling in tears at the side of the pool, hammering at it with a piece of broken wood. As he gripped the rounded lip of the pool and heaved himself out of the water he glanced at her, musing on the wonder of a beautiful woman with a disagreeable personality. Such a woman, he mused, was like a lovely schooner with a mad captain. The custodian of this lovely body was a hard-hearted bitch. It was altogether astonishing.

‘Of course I’ll help you,’ he said. ‘Just wait a moment while I get changed.’

J G Farrell, *The Singapore Grip*

PASSAGE 28

Gamecock

Fear, jealousy and murder are the same
When they put on their long reddish feathers,
Their shawl neck and moccasin head
In a tree bearing levels of women.
5 There is yet no thread

Of light, and his scabbed feet tighten,
Holding sleep as though it were lockjaw,
His feathers damp, his eyes crazed
And cracked like the eyes
10 Of a chicken head cut off or wrung-necked

While he waits for the sun's only cry
All night building up in his throat
To leap out and turn the day red,
To tumble his hens from the pine tree,
15 And then will go down, his hackles

Up, looking everywhere for the other
Cock who could not be there,
Head ruffed and sullenly stepping
As upon his best human-curved steel:
20 He is like any fierce

Old man in a terminal ward:
There is the same look of waiting
That the sun prepares itself for;
The enraged, surviving-
25 another-day blood.

And from him at dawn comes the same
Cry that the world cannot stop.
In all the great building's blue windows
The sun gains strength; on all floors, women
30 Awaken – wives, nurses, sisters and daughters –

And he lies back, his eyes filmed, unappeased,
As all of them, clucking, pillow-patting,
Come to help his best savagery blaze, doomed, dead-
game, demanding unreasonably
35 Battling to the death for what is his.

James Dickey

PASSAGE 29

He was tender with her. He wiped her eyelids with his handkerchief, not noticing how soiled it was. It was stained with ink, crumpled, stuck together. Her lids were large and the handkerchief was stiff, not nearly soft enough. He moistened a corner in his mouth. He was painfully aware of the private softness of her skin, of how the eyes trembled beneath their coverings. He dried the
5 tears with an affection, a particularity, that had never been exercised before.

He fetched the chair from behind the desk. When he lifted it the back separated from the seat and clattered to the floor.

‘Oh dear.’ Lucinda sat, sniffing, on the window ledge. ‘Everything is in collapse.’ And, indeed, this was how seemed to her, not merely today, but today more than before. It had never been
10 what it appeared to be – the physical monument to her success, her solidity. There was a heavy desk, various bureaux, cabinets, samples of manufacture, but she could never see them as solid, but as theatrics. This was her place of exile, and never more than when the window framed a picture of drunken men playing tug of war. She felt humiliated and powerless, like a child dragged down the street by a large dog on a leash.

15 There was a claw hammer in her desk drawer. Oscar – although he was at first too energetic and it seemed that he would fail – succeeded in hammering the chair back together. She obliged him by sitting in it. Her back was bathed in afternoon sunshine.

She said, ‘You must think me really quite ridiculous.’

He said, ‘Oh, no, not at all.’

20 She held out her hand, received the handkerchief and blew her nose. She was anointed with a blue ink smudge. It sat right on the tip of her nose. ‘Am I right to say you guessed the reason for my tears?’

But he had guessed nothing. He felt himself to be too big, too tall, too awkward. She was so condensed and gathered. There was nothing superfluous about her. He squatted with his back
25 against the opposite wall. His legs too long and thin, untidy as a heap of unsawn firewood.

‘No,’ he said, ‘no, really. I have no idea.’

Her face changed subtly. You could not say what had happened – a diminution of the lower lip, a flattening of the cheek, a narrowing of the eye. But there was no ambiguity in her intention. She had withdrawn her trust from him abruptly. ‘If you have no idea,’ she said, ‘how can you not
30 think me ridiculous?’

‘Because you do not have a “ridiculous” character.’

They looked at each other and saw each other change from combative stranger to familiar friend and back again, not staying one thing long enough for certainty. She had velvety green irises of extraordinary beauty. Her eye-whites were laced with tangled filaments of red.

35 ‘And are you curious?’ she asked, pulling and pushing, challenging him even while she promised to confide. ‘About the reason for my tears? Are you curious a little bit?’

He was curious, of course he was, but he had a lover’s curiosity and he feared what she might say. He imagined the tears were somehow connected to the fat letters she left lying on her marble mantelpiece. He imagined they were produced by Dennis Hasset. He was curious. He was not
40 curious at all. He had a lover’s selfishness, was grateful for the intimacy the tears had made possible, was resentful of what they seemed to threaten.

They looked at each other until the look became a stare and both of them lost their nerve at once.

‘Yes,’ he said, ‘of course I am curious.’

45 He wet the corner of the handkerchief again and tenderly removed the smudge from her nose. She tilted her head a little and closed her eyes.

Peter Carey, *Oscar and Lucinda*

Passages for Further Practice - Guiding Questions

PASSAGE 21: *Hats* from *Except by Nature*, Sandra Alcosser

- o What do we learn from this passage about the writer's relationship with and feelings about her aunt?
- o What part is played in the passage by the details the writer gives of her aunt's hats?
- o How does the writer emphasise the difference between her aunt as she once was and as she now is?
- o Discuss the passage's sentence structure and punctuation.

PASSAGE 22: *The Tourist* from *Syracuse*, Donald Justice

- o In what role does the poet cast you, the reader, in this poem?
- o How does the poet make use of references to light, dark, heat, cold and sound to create some of his effects?
- o How does the poet bring his poem to a climax?
- o What aspects of the poem work together to produce its sinister effect?

PASSAGE 23: *The Voice*, Thomas Hardy

- o Describe the relationship between the man and woman in the poem
- o How does the man convey his uncertainty about what is happening?
- o What use is made of the poem's setting?
- o Discuss the sound of the poem

PASSAGE 24: from *The War in Eastern Europe*, John Reed

- o What impression of war do we gain from the writer's account of it here?
- o What do the several references to the horses contribute to the passage?
- o How would you describe the writer's perceptions of and interactions with the people they encounter on their journey (including their driver and the wounded men)?
- o What is interesting about the background of landscape and weather against which this battle is taking place?

PASSAGE 25: *Adolescence – II*, Rita Dove

- o How does the poet create an atmosphere of fear in the poem?
- o Show how that fear is tempered by a feeling of fascination.
- o Discuss the poem's visual effects.
- o How is the phrase 'at the edge of darkness' key to our understanding of the poem?

(When you have worked through Section Four: How to Compare Passages, you will find it interesting to compare this poem with *Heritage* by Dorothea Mackellar (page 54).

PASSAGE 26: from *The Feast of Stephen*, Anthony Hecht (three questions only)

- o How does the poet capture the atmosphere, both physical and emotional, of a boys' locker room (changing-room)?
- o What contrasts do you notice between how the poet presents the boys' behaviour and how he describes the locker room as a place?
- o How does the extract look forward to a later time in the boys' lives?

PASSAGE 27: The Singapore Grip, J G Farrell

- By what methods does the writer indicate how life has been disrupted for the people of Singapore?
- What do we gather about the state of mind of the two principal characters?
- How do the writer, and Ehrendorf, view Joan's behaviour?
- Identify and discuss the contradictions in the passage.

PASSAGE 28: Gamecock, James Dickey,

- How does the poet convey the passion of both the cockerel and the old man?
- What does he want the reader to feel towards them both?
- Discuss the impact of the poem's physical detail.
- Is the poem primarily about a gamecock or about a dying man?

PASSAGE 29: Oscar and Lucinda, Peter Carey

- What do we learn from the passage about the characters of Oscar and Lucinda?
- What are we told about the reasons for Lucinda's state of mind?
- How does the writer convey the sense that the relationship between them may be on the point of changing?
- What part is played in the passage by the physical objects described?

Section Four: How to Compare Passages

Your examiner may want you to compare two passages. That can be quite a complex task, so you need a structure within which to work, or at least a set of headings to make notes under. You'll find that the *SCASI* system can work well for that purpose.

Here are two poems, one from a past **IB Standard Level** paper. Read both poems carefully, then read them again until you're confident you understand them (they aren't very difficult). Then set up a grid, like this but using at least one full page:

<u>Similarities</u>	<u>Differences</u>
<i>Setting</i>	<i>Setting</i>
<i>Character</i>	<i>Character</i>
<i>Action</i>	<i>Action</i>
<i>Style</i>	<i>Style</i>
<i>Ideas</i>	<i>Ideas</i>

As you come to grips with the poems and develop your ideas about them, complete the grid.

Here are the poems.

PASSAGE 30

The Bystander

I am the one who looks the other way,
 In any painting you may see me stand
 Rapt at the sky, a bird, an angel's wing,
 While others kneel, present the myrrh, receive
 5 The benediction from the radiant hand.

I hold the horses while the knights dismount
 And draw their swords to fight the battle out;
 Or else in dim perspective you may see
 My distant figure on the mountain road
 10 When in the plains the hosts are put to rout.

I am the silly soul who looks too late,
 The dullard dreaming, second from the right.
 I hang upon the crowd, but do not mark
 (Cap over eyes) the slaughtered Innocents,¹
 15 Or Icarus,² his downward plunging flight.

Once in a Garden – back view only there –
How well the painter placed me, stroke on stroke,
Yet scarcely seen among the flowers and grass –
I heard a voice say, ‘Eat,’ and would have turned –
20 I often wonder who it was that spoke.

Rosemary Dobson, *Selected Poems* (1973)

¹ Children King Herod killed to avert the prophecy that a Saviour (Jesus Christ) was going to be born

² The son of Daedalus (in Greek Mythology), who made him a pair of wings from wax. The wings melted when Icarus flew close to the sun, and he fell into the sea.

PASSAGE 31

Musée Des Beaux Arts

About suffering they were never wrong,
The Old Masters: how well they understood
Its human position; how it takes place
While someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along;
5 How, when the aged are reverently, passionately waiting
For the miraculous birth, there always must be
Children who did not specially want it to happen, skating
On a pond at the edge of the wood:
They never forgot
10 That even the dreadful martyrdom must run its course
Anyhow in a corner, some untidy spot
Where the dogs go on with their doggy life and the torturer's horse
Scratches its innocent behind on a tree.

In Brueghel's Icarus, for instance: how everything turns away
15 Quite leisurely from the disaster; the ploughman may
Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry,
But for him it was not an important failure; the sun shone
As it had to on the white legs disappearing into the green
Water; and the expensive delicate ship that must have seen
20 Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky,
Had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on.

W H Auden

You can if you wish check your notes against Box 86 in the Answers Booklet.

<u>Similarities</u>	<u>Differences</u>
<i>Setting</i>	<i>Setting</i>
<i>Character</i>	<i>Character</i>
<i>Action</i>	<i>Action</i>
<i>Style</i>	<i>Style</i>
<i>Ideas</i>	<i>Ideas</i>
<p>You will note that we have gone beyond just listing the similarities and differences, and have attempted to explain their effect. You need to do that.</p>	

When you come to write your comparison, you have a choice. You can work through your notes either horizontally (dealing with each of the **SCASI** elements in turn) or vertically (writing about one poem, exhaustively, then the other). It doesn't much matter which way you organise your material.

If you are asked to make a judgement about which is the better piece of writing, say what you think, of course, with examples from your commentary to support your decision. Once again there is no single right answer...but make sure you base your judgement on literary rather than personal criteria.

Here's another pair of poems, for further practice. You may already know the first one. They're longer than the last two poems, but in some ways easier to compare because there are bigger differences between them. (That does make the task more straightforward, you will find – differences are easier to spot when they are less subtle).

PASSAGE 32

Snake

A snake came to my water-trough
On a hot, hot day, and I in pyjamas for the heat,
To drink there.

In the deep, strange-scented shade of the great dark carob-tree
5 I came down the steps with my pitcher
And must wait, must stand and wait, for there he was at the trough before me.

He reached down from a fissure in the earthwall in the gloom
And trailed his yellow-brown slackness soft-bellied down, over the edge of the stone trough
And rested his throat upon the stone bottom,
10 And where the water had dripped from the tap, in a small clearness,
He sipped with his straight mouth,
Softly drank through his straight gums, into his slack long body,
Silently.

Someone was before me at my water-trough,
15 And I, like a second comer, waiting.

He lifted his head from his drinking, as cattle do,
And looked at me vaguely, as drinking cattle do,
And flickered his two-forked tongue from his lips, and mused a moment,
And stopped and drank a little more,
20 Being earth-brown, earth-golden from the burning bowels of earth
On the day of Sicilian July, with Etna smoking.

The voice of my education said to me
He must be killed,
For in Sicily the black, black snakes are innocent, the gold are venomous.

25 And voices in me said, If you were a man
You would take a stick and break him now, and finish him off.

But must I confess how I liked him,
How glad I was he had come like a guest in quiet, to drink at my water-trough

And depart peaceful, pacified, and thankless,
30 Into the burning bowels of this earth?

Was it cowardice, that I dared not kill him?
Was it perversity, that I longed to talk to him?
Was it humility, to feel so honoured?
I felt so honoured.

35 And yet those voices:
If you were not afraid, you would kill him!

And truly I was afraid, I was most afraid,
But even so, honoured still more
That he should seek my hospitality
40 From out the dark door of the secret earth.

He drank enough
And lifted his head, dreamily, as one who has drunken,
And flickered his tongue like a forked light on the air, so black,
Seeming to lick his lips,
45 And looked around like a god, unseeing, into the air,
And slowly turned his head,
And slowly, very slowly, as if thrice adream,
Proceeded to draw his slow length curving round
And climb again the broken bank of my wall-face.

50 And as he put his head into that dreadful hole,
And as he slowly drew up, snake-easing his shoulders, and entered farther,
A sort of horror, a sort of protest against his withdrawing, into that horrid black hole,
Deliberately going into the blackness, and slowly drawing himself after,
Overcame me now his back was turned.

55 I looked round, I put down my pitcher,
I picked up a clumsy log
And threw it at the water-trough with a clatter.

I think it did not hit him,
But suddenly that part of him that was left behind convulsed in undignified haste,
60 Writhed like a log and was gone
Into the black hole, the earth-lipped fissure in the wall-front,
At which, in the intense still noon, I stared with fascination.

And immediately I regretted it.
I thought how paltry, how vulgar, what a mean act!
65 I despised myself and the voices of my accursed human education.

And I thought of the albatross,
And I wished he would come back, my snake.

For he seemed to me again like a king,

Like a king in exile, uncrowned in the underworld,
70 Now due to be crowned again.

And so, I missed my chance with one of the lords
Of life.

And I have something to expiate:
A pettiness.

D H Lawrence

PASSAGE 33

The Killer

The day was clear as fire,
the birds sang frail as glass,
when thirsty I came to the creek
and fell by its side in the grass.

5

My breast on the bright moss
and shower-embroidered weeds,
my lips to the live water
I saw him turn in the reeds.

10 Black horror sprang from the dark
in a violent birth,
and through its cloth of grass
I felt the clutch of earth.

O beat him into the ground,
15 O strike him till he dies
or else your life itself
drains through those colourless eyes.

I struck again and again.
Slender in black and red
20 he lies, and his icy glance
turns outward, clear and dead.

But nimble my enemy
as water is, or wind,
He has slipped from his death aside
and vanished into my mind.

25

He has vanished whence he came,
my nimble enemy:
and the ants come out to the snake
and drink at his shallow eye.

Judith Wright

Check that you've said something about:

- o The length of the poems, the amount of detail
- o The versification (rhythm, rhyme, stanza form)
- o Verb tense
- o Similes
- o The snakes' colour
- o The use of quoted speech
- o The impact of the encounter on each poet

What if you have to compare a poem with a piece of prose? The principles are the same, and you can use the same structure. You will probably have to take into account, however, the general differences between poetry and prose and say something about that. So have your ideas on the topic ready – but keep your expression of them short and to the point, and avoid over-theorising. Remember it's the two passages you're supposed to be writing about, not literary genres (types of literature) in general.

Here, by way of a little contribution to your thinking (or your class discussion) about the differences, is a note in the form of a poem, by Howard Nemerov:

Because You Asked about the Line between Prose and Poetry

Sparrows were feeding in a freezing drizzle
That while you watched turned into pieces of snow
Riding a gradient invisible
From silver aslant to random, white, and slow.

There came a moment that you couldn't tell.
And then they clearly flew instead of fell.

You may have noticed, in fact, that *Snake* itself is half-way to being prose (just as some of Lawrence's prose is half-way to 'flying' – being poetry). Here, however, is a piece of 'real' prose followed by *The Interrogation* again. Compare them.

PASSAGE 34

Pulling up at my house, I beep on the horn before remembering Roger has sent Charles home. As I get out of the car to open the gates, two ANC jeeps come roaring up the road. I stop to watch them pass. But they don't pass. Instead they screech to a halt and a squad of soldiers, led by a captain, jump out and surround me. The captain is a stocky man with wide-spaced eyes and a flat face. His teeth are individual, discoloured stumps. They have been filed and filled with gold. He asks if I am James Gillespie. I say, rather haughtily, as though it's none of their business, that I am. He says that I am to come with them to the Central Prison for questioning. Thinking of Roger's example, I demand to see his warrant. The captain's reaction is immediate but at the same time unhurried, almost languid. He simply turns to the soldier next to him, takes his rifle and casually smashes the butt into the side of my head. What I feel first is not pain, but nausea, an overwhelming desire to vomit. It's a new experience for me – nausea not from the stomach

but from the head. As I retch, I try to bend forward but the world is no longer ordered the way I know it to be. Sky and earth are moving, they are intent on changing places. The horizon jumps up to my face, then careers away again. My legs are giving way, I am sliding down. Blinking, I
15 look up at the massed brains of the grey-white clouds above. They swirl around and I am sick again. I splutter and choke as the vomit settles back in my throat. It is not easy to breathe. The captain stoops over me. My eyes are not working as they should. He is in vision for a second, sways away, comes back into view. My head spins.

‘Where is Auguste Kilundu?’ he demands.

20 I hear him clearly. My ears are working at least.

‘Where is Kilundu?’

I try to speak, but nothing comes. I am not sure what I want to say. To tell him I don’t know where Auguste is or that I do. I concentrate on getting some words out. The effort causes a wave of nausea to rise. I shut my eyes. The next thing I feel is a blow to my stomach and suddenly my
25 lungs are airless. I let out a groan and gasp to breathe. I feel a sharp pain in my temple. Someone may have kicked me in the head, but I cannot be sure. Panic grips me. I am thinking about brain damage and ruptured internal organs. I am worried they will go too far, that they will kill me before I get to the Central Prison. I want to shout out that I will tell them everything.

I feel myself being dragged to my feet. I think I may have pissed myself. The captain is
30 laughing through his filed, peg teeth.

Ronan Bennet, *The Catastrophist*

PASSAGE 8 (a repeat)

The Interrogation

We could have crossed the road but hesitated,
And then came the patrol;
The leader conscientious and intent,
The men surly, indifferent.
5 While we stood by and waited
The interrogation began. He says the whole
Must come out now, who, what we are,
Where we have come from, with what purpose, whose
Country or camp we plot for or betray.
10 Question on question.
We have stood and answered through the standing day
And watched across the road beyond the hedge
The careless lovers in pairs go by,
Hand linked in hand, wandering another star,
15 So near we could shout to them. We cannot choose
Answer or action here,
Though still the careless lovers saunter by
And the thoughtless field is near.
We are on the very edge,
20 Endurance almost done,
And still the interrogation is going on.

Edwin Muir

You could also, if you wished, look again at the verses from *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (page 43) and the passage from *The Open Boat* (page 49) and compare them. They're both about the power of the sea...

Then there are some very marked similarities between *Heritage* by Dorothea Mackellar (page 54) and *Adolescence II* by Rita Dove (page 92).

Another interesting exercise would be to pair up passages from the section we have added to this new edition of the study guide (Section Five, 'Passages from More Recent Examination Papers') with passages from earlier in the book. You'll need to wait until you've worked on that section, of course; but you will find that seeing connections between two or more passages will often throw new light on the passages themselves.

Just for good measure, here's *Entirely* again, and a short poem you may have fun comparing with it.

PASSAGE 20 (a repeat)

Entirely

If we could get the hang of it entirely
It would take too long;
All we know is the splash of words in passing
And falling twigs of song,
And when we try to eavesdrop on the great
Presences it is rarely
5 That by a stroke of luck we can appropriate
Even a phrase entirely.

If we could find our happiness entirely
In somebody else's arms
We should not fear the spears of the spring nor the city's
10 Yammering fire alarms
But, as it is, the spears each year go through
Our flesh and almost hourly
Bell or siren banishes the blue
Eyes of Love entirely.

15
And if the world were black or white entirely
And all the charts were plain
Instead of a mad weir of tigerish waters,
A prism of delight and pain,
We might be surer where we wished to go
20 Or again we might be merely
Bored but in brute reality there is no
Road that is right entirely.

Louis MacNeice, *Plant and Phantom* (1941)

PASSAGE 35

Glory Be to God for Dappled Things

Glory be to God for dappled things –
For skies of couple-colour as a brindled cow;
For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim;
Fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls; finches' wings;
5 Landscape plotted and pieced – fold, fallow, and plough;
And all trades, their gear and tackle and trim.
All things counter, original, spare, strange;
Whatever is fickle, freckled, (who knows how?)
With swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim;
10 He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change:
Praise him.

Gerard Manley Hopkins

Section Five: Passages from More Recent Examinations

We have included these to give you access to a further selection of passages across a wide range of topics, forms and styles. We have not differentiated between levels of difficulty: sometimes passages that seem as if they will be troublesome open up very readily when you begin to work on them; and a piece of what appears to be straightforward writing can present unforeseen problems when you begin to analyse it (often because it *is* simple).

The guiding questions are designed to draw attention to the each passage's key aspects. IB teachers and students will find them a particularly useful addition to the Higher Level passages, which did not have questions attached to them in the original examination papers. We have placed the questions together at the end of this section, so that all passages can be used for unaided commentary practice.

You can use the passages in a variety of ways. The following are alternatives (but not all mutually exclusive).

1. Read them through just for interest and pleasure, and do nothing more.
2. Read them through and select two or three you would be most confident writing about in the exam (in other words, go through only the preliminary stage of the 'commentary experience' – passage selection).
3. Read each one through and decide which of the five **SCASI** elements is predominant in it (i.e. is most significant or has most impact on the reader). Then decide on the next most telling aspect, and so on. Your response for the first passage below might read, for instance: **Narrative, Setting, Character** and so on. (It may not – all your answers will be debatable.)
4. Devise a set of five guiding questions for each passage, covering the five **SCASI** elements. You could then, of course, set about answering them, or at least make notes towards a response. You could also work with other students to see just how answerable (and helpful) your questions are. (It's quite likely, when you perform this exercise, that there will be overlap between some of your questions; and not all passages will yield questions on all five topics.) You will be able to compare your questions with those we have placed at the end of this section.
5. Focus on one of the **SCASI** elements, and explore the part it plays in a selection (or all) of the passages. Then turn your attention to the other elements. You will thus develop a thorough understanding of each of the elements in turn, as it shows itself in a variety of writing. Here are some questions to help you.

Setting

- o Is the setting predominantly geographical, historical, social, political, philosophical, moral or economic? (You'll find some clarification of those terms on page 11.)
- o How 'large' is the setting (e.g. is it very local and specific, or universal)?
- o How much physical detail is included in the descriptions?
- o Are any of the physical details symbolic?
- o Does the writer 'move around' within the setting (focusing on different parts of it in turn)?
- o Does the setting tie in particularly well with any of the other **SCASI** elements (e.g. is it does help reveal character, support the action, help express the central idea)?
- o Does the setting raise any questions?

Character

- o Is the only character the writer himself or herself? What impression do we get of him (her) as person?
- o Is either the writer or one of his/her characters clearly trying to present himself/herself to us in a particular light?
- o If there is a central character other than the writer is he (she) also the narrator? What is the effect of that?
- o If there is more than one character in the passage, is the main focus on them as individuals or on their relationship?
- o What is the writer's relationship with his or her character(s)?
- o What does the writer want us to feel about the character(s) in the passage?

Action

- o Is most of the action in the past, present or future?
- o Does the main interest of the passage lie in the past, present or future?
- o Is there anything particularly interesting or unusual about the verbs in the passage?
- o Is there a problem to be solved?
- o Is there a climax?
- o What in the passage makes us care about 'what happens next' in the action?

Style

- o What is notable about the diction (choice of words)?
- o What patterns of imagery (groups of images) can you detect?
- o How does the passage work on the reader's senses?
- o What examples of figurative (non-literal) language can you find? Are there patterns in its use?
- o Is the sentence structure mainly simple or complex?
- o How does the writer use dialogue?
- o Are there unusually large numbers of questions, exclamations or commands, alongside plain statements?
- o How does the organisation of the passage (into lines, paragraphs or stanzas) match the content, and in particular the development of the content? ('Content' includes both action and ideas.)
- o Are there any other special effects in the passage, arising from its style?

Ideas

- o Does the passage make a statement or simply ask a question?
- o How general, or how precise, are the ideas? (e.g. do they apply to all of us all the time, or to only a small number of us sometimes?) Another way of asking the question: how big are the ideas?
- o How ambiguous are the ideas? (i.e. can the passage be interpreted in more than one way?) If so, which is the most likely interpretation?
- o If there is ambiguity, is it deliberate on the part of the writer?
- o Does the passage's title (if it has one) help us understand the passage itself?

All of the above will allow you insight into the passages, and help you develop a check-list of what to look for if you have to write a commentary without the assistance of guiding questions.

6. Use the passages for straightforward practice. SL candidates can use the guiding questions as the basis for their commentaries. HL candidates will find it helpful to check their finished commentaries against the questions to see whether they've covered all the areas the examiner might have thought important.

PASSAGE 36

She looked away up into the sky: the palest kind of blue, a big quiet light. High up, two birds were flying together, drawing a straight line through the air like aircraft in formation.

Just over the brow of the hill was a fork in the road and a flaking wooden sign. One fork pointed downhill towards CASCADE RIVULET, the other uphill, to HANGING ROCK.
5 Someone had tied a stone on the end of a bit of string and hung it from the sign. She laughed aloud, suddenly, a noise like a bark.

The dog twisted its head to look up at her in surprise and she stopped laughing. She glanced around, as if someone might have heard her, laughing on an empty road, and looked at the rock again. It was not really all that funny.

10 Below her, she could see Cascade Rivulet glinting metallically between the trees. The road ahead of her turned a sudden sharp corner down the slope, so steep it had washed away into long corrugations, and then all at once there was the river, and the bridge.

She recognised it straight away from its picture in the paper, a humble little thing, the bend giving it an apologetic look. It was hard to see why the town was split on it. She walked down to
15 it, feeling stones rolling away from under her shoes down the slope. A white ute was parked at the far end of the bridge but there was no sign of anyone, only a flat paddock in which some cows stood all lined up the same way like ornaments along a mantelpiece.

She stopped in the middle of the bridge and looked down at the river. Sun shone through the transparent amber water and lit up rounded rocks just under the surface, and fans of white sand.
20 Where a band of sun cast a slice of black shadow, the water was dark and secretive.

She wanted to go down there, under the bridge, and saw that the fence at one end had collapsed, the wooden posts leaning crookedly where the bank had been scoured out by flood. She would not have actually forced her way through anyone's fence. She knew how farmers felt about them, and about city folk who had no respect for them. But someone had been there before
25 her. She could see where the post had been eased further sideways in the soft ground, and a rip down the dirt of the bank, where someone's heels had slid.

Underneath, the bridge was a quaint, clumsy thing, a clutter of primitive timbers wedged against each other into crude simple joints. Where each horizontal met a vertical, each had had a piece removed so they were locked tightly together.

30 It was like two people holding hands.

From a distance the old wood looked nothing more interesting than grey, but close up, each timber had its own colour and its own personality. One was pink-grey with fine streaks of red like dried blood in the grain. Another was green-grey with circular blooms of brown-grey lichen, the next was the bleached blue-grey with a kinked grain like an old-fashioned marcel wave.

35 She stood with her shoes sinking slowly in the damp sand, looking up into the underbelly of the bridge, feeling the muscles twitching in her thighs after the fast walk. It was all coarse and clumsy, but as well as the subtle textures of the grain, the shapes fitted together in a satisfying way, and there was what they called at the Museum an *interplay* between the light and the shadow that drew the eye back to look again and again.

40 She got a notebook and pencil out of her pocket and stood drawing squares and long rectangles that interlinked and interlocked, glancing between her page and the pencil.

When she had filled a page she turned over and started again. She spent a long time getting the angles right where one rectangle came in and locked into another. It looked so simple as to be not worth a second glance, but drawing it showed how complicated it really was.

45 When she had covered the third page she felt she had the shapes right, and started to shade the squares and rectangles with her pencil. Light, dark, light, dark. It was in no way a realistic

drawing of the way the bridge looked, but it was what it might look like if you reduced it to its essence: simple squares and rectangles, simple lights and darks, arranged in a way that was not as simple as it seemed.

from Kate Grenville, *The Idea of Perfection* (1999)

¹ split: some of the townspeople want the bridge demolished and replaced by a new one, some want it kept because it is a part of the area's history.

² ute: pick-up truck ('utility vehicle')

³ marcel wave: a particular hair style

PASSAGE 37

Otherwise

I come
from an opposite country
to yours, where water spirals
and the moon waxes
5 otherwise.
my stars assemble in unfamiliar patterns
and I watch often
not traffic or television
but hour by hour the huge tide
10 absently fingering rocks and small shells
and the wet brown kelp
where fish go sliding through.

if you were with me now
on my favourite beach
15 we'd watch the distant seismograph
of silver peaks darkening to indigo
and walk on the breakwater
towards the harbour mouth,
disturbing the flocks of terns
20 that wheel up shrieking in slim wild voices
to land again behind us
renewing their conference. I would slip
my cold hand in your pocket,
you'd look at me and grin
25 and we would walk together quietly
right to the very end,
where big chained rocks hold back
the same Pacific ocean, lumbering in.

Cilla McQueen, from *Axis: poems and drawings* (2001)

PASSAGE 38

The air smelled like diamonds. It was sharp in their lungs. Jane lay in a hole in the sand dug by the tide 'round her bones; she was cold. Further on there was Sloan without Sybil. There was Nolly. None of them moved. Theirs was a not-life, a state of nonbeing, a coma from which they were waking, a stage in the life of a worm. Their hearts were beating, their lungs emptied and filled, but the wall they had ridden onto the shore had collapsed on their memory, none of them
5 knew whose body this was, whose pain she was feeling, or even, most strange, if the pain was the proof that she was still living. Each one, when she was able to, wept. No one was glad to discover that she was still alive. This was not life as she'd known it. This was a torture. Gradually, slowly, they moved. They were not far from each other. From where she was, Gaby
10 could make out the shapes of some others, all orange. Things that could not swim were swimming: trees, the horizon, a bee. Colors swam. There were orange forms crawling out of the earth. Gaby tried to move and remembered her knees. Needles were turning in them, her knees had been shaved on the coral. They stung. Basta!¹ she wanted to say, but her tongue was covered with sand. How many hours it took them to wake didn't matter. They woke. They woke slowly.
15 They couldn't move. Life preservers had saved them, sleeveless orange jackets defining their species among the corpses of fishes strewn at the high water line. By noon of that day the heat raised a stench of dead fish and dried seaweed. The adjutant storks had returned with gannets and jungle crows – carrion eaters arrived. They stalked around Oopi, testing her palatability, pecking her till she jacked herself into a sit. Her head hurt and the sun was too bright. She was
20 confused. She was wearing one shoe. She picked herself up and felt dizzy. This orange thing was hot and it wouldn't come off when she pulled it. How long had she slept? She was scratchy and stiff. What was the name of this game? Where was breakfast? She walked down the slope to the water and squatted and peed through her knickers. Something about it suggested that it wasn't right but it felt like the right thing to do. She took off her shoe and forgot it. Something smelled
25 awful. She noticed the fish. She walked up the beach and the birds ran at her, letting her know their opinion. They were eating the fish by the dozens, scissoring out the gray flesh with their beaks. She felt thirsty. Amanda was clutching her head in her hands and Oopi sat down in the sand next to her. "I'm thirsty," she said. "This orange thing is bothering me."
30 "Take it off, then," Amanda tried to say kindly. The boats were both gone. She had been sitting and staring for hours, waiting for Help.

Marianne Wiggins, from *John Dollar* (1989)

¹ Basta: enough

PASSAGE 39

Parachute

Parachute men say
The first jump
Takes the breath away
Feet in the air disturbs
5 Till you get used to it

Solid ground

Is now where you left it
 As you plunge down
 Perhaps head first
 10 As you listen to
 Your arteries talking
 You learn to sustain hope

 Suddenly you are only
 Holding an open umbrella
 15 In a windy place
 As the warm earth
 Reaches out to you
 Reassures you
 The vibrating interim is over

 20 You try to land
 Where green grass yields
 And carry your pack
 Across the fields

 The violent arrival
 25 Puts out the joint
 Earth has nowhere to go
 You are at the starting point

 Jumping across worlds
 In condensed time
 30 After the awkward fall
 We are always at the starting point.

Lenrie Peters, from *A New Book of African Verse* (1984)

PASSAGE 40

So the playground was hell: Chinese burns, pinches, slaps and kicks, and horrible games. I can still hear the noise of a thick wet skipping rope slapping the ground. There'd be a big girl each end and you had to leap through without tripping. Joining in was only marginally less awful than being left out. It's said (truly) that most women forget the pain of childbirth; I think that we all
 5 forget the pain of being a child at school for the first time, the sheer ineptitude, as though you'll never learn to mark out your own space. It's doubly shaming – shaming to *remember* as well, to feel so sorry for your scabby little self back there in small people's purgatory.

My first days at school were punctuated by fierce contests in the yard, duels almost, complete with spectators, with the one girl who might have been expected to be my friend. In fact, she did
 10 become my very best friend, years later, when we went round holding hands painfully fast and giggling together hysterically, but for now she was my sworn enemy. Gail (she even had a funny name, like me) had hair in ringlets, green-hazel eyes and pale, clear, slightly olive skin stretched tight and shiny over her muscles, and she was nearly a year older than I was. She'd have won our war in any case, though, since she was so physically confident, in charge of her body even when

15 she was five. Was she already going to dancing lessons? I don't remember. In adult life she became a teacher of physical education and modern dance herself, and even in the days of our adolescent intimacy she would sometimes win an argument by twisting my wrist. I was convinced at the start, anyway, that she was simply better at inhabiting her body than I was – not only better at face-pulling, hair-pulling, pinching, scratching and every sort of violence, but wiry and graceful, so that she made me feel like an unstrung puppet.

20 Once she'd thoroughly trounced me in public, Gail ignored me and held court in her own corner every playtime. She remained something of a loner, however. Other little girls might admire the ringlets and the dresses with smocking on the yokes¹, and the white socks that stayed up, but she was not allowed out to play in the square after school and everyone knew that she had to sit for hours every night while her grandmother twisted her hair in rags. What really set her apart, though – even more effectively than the vicarage² set me apart – was the fact that her mother was divorced.

Lorna Sage, *Bad Blood* (2000)

¹ smocking on the yokes: a pattern sewn onto the front of dresses, below the neckline

² vicarage: the local church minister's house

PASSAGE 41

Two Hands

My father in his study sits up late,
a pencil nodding stiffly in the hand
that thirteen times between breakfast and
supper led a scalpel an intricate
5 dance. The phone has sobbed itself to sleep
but he has articles to read. I curse
tonight, at the other end of the house,
this other hand whose indecisions keep
me cursing nightly; fingers with some style
10 on paper, elsewhere none. Who would have thought
hands so alike – spade palms, blunt fingers short
in the joint – would have no more in common? All
today, remembering the one, I have watched
the other save no one, serve no one, dance
15 with this pencil. Hand, you may have your chance
to stitch a life for fingers that have stitched
new life for many. Down the *Lancet*¹ margin
this hand moves rapidly as mine moves slow.
A spasm shakes the phone at this elbow.
20 The pencil drops: he will be out again.

Jon Stallworthy, *Root and Branch* (Phoenix Living Poets) (1976)

¹*Lancet*: medical journal

PASSAGE 42

I was lucky. I was not the eldest son. For that reason not much was expected from me. I was left to myself a great deal, and enjoyed much freedom. My appearance and demeanour did not pose a threat to anyone. I was a very ordinary boy. You see me now as a Sultan, surrounded by all the symbols of power. You are impressed and, possibly, even a bit frightened. You worry that if you exceed certain proprieties your head might roll in the dust. This fear is normal. It is the effect which power has on the Sultan's subjects. But this same power can transform even the most diminutive personality into a figure of large proportions. Look at me. If you had known me when I was a boy and Shahan Shah was my oldest brother you would never have imagined that I could be the Sultan of Misr, and you would have been right. Fate and history conspired to make me what I am today.

The only person who saw something in me was my paternal grandmother. When I was nine or ten years old, she saw me and a group of my friends trying to kill a snake. As boys we would compete with each other in these foolish things. We would try and grab a snake by its tail and then swing it, before crushing its head on a stone or, as the braver ones among us did, stamping on its head with our feet.

My grandmother, having observed this scene carefully, shouted at me.
"Yusuf! Yusuf ibn Ayyub! Come here at once!"

The other boys ran away, and I walked slowly towards her, expecting a blow around my ears. My grandmother had a legendary temper and, so Shadhi had once told me, she had struck my father across the face when he was a grown man. No one dared to ask the cause of such a public display. My father had left the room and, so they say, mother and son did not speak to each other for a year. In the end, it was my father who apologized.

To my amazement, she hugged me and kissed me in turn on both my eyes.

"You are fearless, boy, but be careful. Some snakes can strike back, even when you have them by the tail."

I remember laughing with relief. She then told me of a dream she had experienced before I was born.

"You were still inside your mother's belly. I think you kicked a great deal. Your mother used to complain sometimes that she felt she was going to give birth to a colt. One night I dreamt that a large man-swallowing snake was crawling towards your mother, who was lying uncovered in the sun. Your mother opened her eyes and began to sweat. She wanted to move, but could not lift her body. Slowly the snake crawled towards her. Then suddenly, like the door of a magical cave, her belly opened. An infant walked out, sword in hand, and, with one mighty blow, decapitated the serpent. Then he looked at his mother and walked back into her stomach. You will be a great warrior, my son. It is written in your stars and Allah himself will be your guide."

My father and uncle laughed at my grandmother and her foolish dreams, but even at that time this interpretation undoubtedly had a positive effect on me. She was the first person to take me seriously.

Tariq Ali, *The Book of Saladin* (1998)

PASSAGE 43

Summer Solstice, Batticaloa, Sri Lanka

The war had turned inward until it resembled
suicide. The only soothing thing was water.
I passed the sentries, followed the surf out of sight.
I would sink into the elements, become simple.

5 Surf sounds like erasure, over and over.
I lay down and let go, the way you trust an animal.
When I opened my eyes, all down the strand
small crabs, the bright yellow of a crayon,

had come out onto the sand. Their numbers, scattered,
10 resembled the galactic spill and volume of the stars.
I, who had lain down alone, emptied,
waked at the center of ten thousand prayers.

Who would refuse such attention. I let it sweeten me
back into the universe. I was alive, in the midst
15 of great loving, which is all I've ever wanted.
The soldiers of both sides probably wanted just this.

Marilyn Krysl, *Warscape with Lovers* (1997)

PASSAGE 44

Wimsey did not want to hear any more. He made his way down to the belfry¹ door and climbed
the stair to the ringing chamber. The bells were still sounding their frenzied call. He passed the
sweating ringers and climbed again – up through the clock-chamber, piled with household
goods, and up and on to the bell-chamber itself. As his head rose through the floor, the brazen
5 fury of the bells fell about his ears like the blows from a thousand beating hammers. The whole
tower was drenched and drunken with noise. It rocked and reeled with the reeling of the bells,
and staggered like a drunken man. Stunned and shaken, Wimsey set his foot on the last ladder.

Halfway up he stopped, clinging desperately with his hands. He was pierced through and
buffeted by the clamour. Through the brazen crash and clatter there went one high note, shrill
10 and sustained, that was like a sword in the brain. All the blood in his body seemed to rush to his
head, swelling it to bursting-point. He released his hold on the ladder and tried to shut out the
uproar with his fingers, but such a sick giddiness overcame him that he swayed, ready to fall. It
was not noise – it was brute pain, a grinding, bludgeoning, ran-dan² crazy, intolerable torment.
He felt himself screaming, but could not hear his own cry. His ear-drums were cracking; his
15 senses swam away. It was infinitely worse than any roar of heavy artillery. That had beaten and
deafened, but this unendurable shrill clangour was a raving madness, an assault of devils. He
could move neither forward nor backwards though his failing wits urged him, 'I must get out – I
must get out of this.' The belfry heaved and wheeled about him as the bells dipped and swung
within the reach of an outstretched hand. Mouth up, mouth down, they brawled with their
20 tongues of bronze, and through it all that shrill, high, sweet, relentless note went stabbing and

shivering.

He could not go down, for his head dizzied and stomach retched at the thought of it. With a last, desperate sanity he clutched at the ladder and forced his tottering limbs upward. Foot by foot, rung by rung, he fought his way to the top. Now the trap-door was close above his head. He
25 raised a leaden hand and thrust the bolt aside. Staggering, feeling as though his bones were turned to water, and with blood running from his nose and ears, he felt rather than stepped, out upon the windy roof. As he flung the door to behind him, the demoniac clangour sank back into the pit, to rise again, transmuted to harmony, through the louvres of the belfry windows.

Dorothy L. Sayers, *The Nine Tailors* (1982)

¹belfry: a bell tower

²ran-dan a loud banging noise (dialect or slang)

PASSAGE 45

Child and Insect

He cannot hold his hand huge enough.
How can he cage the sudden clockwork fizz
he has snatched from the grassblades?
He races back, how quick he is,
5 look! to his mother
through the shrieking meadow.
But kneeling at her side
finds only a silence in his fearful clutch.
Revealed, the grasshopper
10 lies broken on his palm.
It is
nothing now: its dead struts snapped
even the brittle lidless eyes
crushed into the tangle.
15 and the landscape flood away
in tears. Sunlight
For honor he dare not
look at what is cradled in his fingers
20 and will not be comforted.
0,
will not.
Yet quick and now
as if by magic the undead insect
25 with a flick re-
assembles itself
throbs
and is latched to a leaf a yard away.
And once again incredibly it skirls unspoilt

30 its chirruping music.
 He weeps, sick with relief and rage.
 'There now, my love. It wasn't hurt at all.'
 His mother laughs and puts an arm
 around him.

35 Tearfully
 he shakes her off.
 He will not rejoice (in time he may
 but that is not yet certain) after
 such betrayal of this grief.

40 He must not
 have tears torn from him
 by petty trickery.

Before his mother's eyes he would not care
 to do to (and perhaps not ever)

45 but gladly in this instant he
 could snatch this creature up and
 shatter it
 for leaving him so naked.

Robert Druce (1980)

PASSAGE 46

A country bus drew up below the church and a young man got out. This he had to do carefully because he had a peg leg¹.

The roadway was asphalted blue.

5 It was a summer day in England. Rain clouds were amassed back of a church tower which stood on rising ground. As he looked up he noticed well those slits, built for defence, in the blood coloured brick. Then he ran his eye with caution over cypresses and between gravestones. He might have been watching for a trap, who had lost his leg in France for not noticing the gun beneath a rose.

10 For, climbing around and up these trees of mourning, was rose after rose, while, here and there, the spray overburdened by the mass of flower, a live wreath lay fallen on a wreath of stone, or on a box in marble colder than this day, or onto frosted paper blooms which, under glass, marked each bed of earth wherein the dear departed encouraged life above in the green grass, in the cypresses and in those roses gay and bright which, as still as this dark afternoon, stared at whosoever looked, or hung their heads to droop, to grow stained, to die when their turn

15 came.

It was a time of war. The young man in pink tweeds had been repatriated from a prisoners' camp on the other side. Now, at the first opportunity, he was back.

20 He had known the village this church stood over, but not well. He had learned the walks before he turned soldier, though he had met few of those who lived by. The graveyard he had never entered. But he came now to visit because someone he loved, a woman, who, above all at night, had been in his feelings when he was behind barbed wire, had been put there while he was away, and her name, of all names, was Rose.

The bus, with its watching passengers, departed. In the silence which followed he began to

25 climb the path leading to those graves, when came a sudden upthrusting cackle of geese in a panic, the sound of which brought home to him a stack of faggots² he had seen blown high by a grenade, each stick separately stabbing the air in a frieze³ which he had watched fall back, as an opened fan closes. So, while the geese quietened, he felt what he had seen until the silence which followed, when he at once forgot.

But there was left him an idea that he had been warned.

30 Propping himself on his stick, he moved slowly up that path to the wicket gate between two larger cypresses. He felt more than ever that he did not wish to be observed. So he no longer watched the roses. As if to do his best to become unseen, he kept his eyes on the gravel over which he was dragging the peg leg.

35 For there was a bicycle bell, ringing closer and closer by the church, clustering spray upon spray of sound which wreathed the air much as those roses grew around the headstones, whence, so he felt, they narrowly regarded him.

Which caused him to stop dead when a boy of about six came, over the hill on a tricycle, past the porch; then, as the machine got up speed, he stood to one side, in spite of the gate still being closed between the two of them. He sharply stared but, as he took in the child's fair head,
40 he saw nothing, nothing was brought back. He did not even feel a pang, as well he might if only he had known.

Charley was irritated when the boy, after getting off to open the gate and climbing onto his machine again, shrilly rang the bell as he dashed past. Then the young man started slowly on his way once more. And he forgot the boy who was gone, who spelled nothing to him.

45 For Rose had died while he was in France, he said over and over under his breath. She was dead, and he did not hear until he was a prisoner. She had died, and this sort of sad garden was where they had put her without him, and, as he looked about while he leaned on the gate, he felt she must surely have come as a stranger when her time came, that if a person's nature is at all alive after he or she has gone, then she could never have imagined herself here nailed into a box,
50 in total darkness, briar roots pushing down to the red hair of which she had been so proud and fond. He could not even remember her saying that she had been in this churchyard, which was now the one place one could pay a call on Rose, whom he could call to mind, though never all over at one time, or at all clearly, crying, dear Rose, laughing, mad Rose, holding her baby, or, oh Rose, best of all in bed, her glorious locks abounding.

Henry Green, the opening paragraphs of the novel *Back* (1946)

¹peg leg: wooden leg

²faggots: a bundle of firewood

³frieze: a decorative edging near the top of a wall

PASSAGE 47

Night Wind

Tonight the wind blows through
all the worlds I have known and
through all the lives I have led.
The wind blows in the trees,
5 deeper into each.
The wind blows forever,
strains like something

endlessly departing.
Restless, impatient,
10 it races without burden.

The night wind implores me through walls,
claims me inside buildings.
The night wind is an empire
in exodus, a deliverance
15 beside the dark shape of trees. Oaks
that wrestle the gusty twilight
under starry skies.

The wind takes
me in its giddy rush and
20 gathers me into a storm of longing,
rising on wings of darkness.
There is a music in the wind.
The thrum of guy wires¹
of a thousand branches.
25 Muffled percussion
of banging doors, the
sibilous² clamour of rushing leaves.

Above me the Milky Way
and leaping, striding, I am the
30 bloodrun of the atmosphere.
Racing with leaves and newspapers
down deserted streets,
over fields and playgrounds.
I pace the wind
35 through forests and beside highways.
Along oceans and rivers
the gale's mysterious, unspoken imperative
is a joyous delirium with
nothing at its end.

Christopher Dewdney, from *Demon Pond* (1984)

¹Wires stretched tight and pegged to the ground to hold a pole upright.

²Making a hissing noise

PASSAGE 48

The child had been born punctually. This first grave and alarming duty of entering into the world was performed not only unflinchingly but with a flourish: for this thoroughly satisfactory child was a boy. His little organism, long before birth, had put aside the soft and drowsy temptation to be a female. It would have been so simple for the last pair of chromosomes to have doubled up like the rest, and turned out every cell in the future body complete, well-balanced, serene, and

5 feminine. Instead, one intrepid particle decided to live alone, unmated, unsatisfied, restless, and
masculine; and it imposed this unstable romantic equilibrium on every atom of the man-child's
flesh, and of the man-child's sinews. To be a male means to have chosen the more arduous,
though perhaps the less painful adventure, more remote from home, less deeply rooted in one
10 soil and one morality. It means to be pledged to a certain courage, to a certain recklessness about
the future: and if these risks are to be run without disaster, there should be also a greater
buoyancy, less sensitiveness, less capacity for utter misery than women commonly show. Yet
this compensation is sometimes lacking. Mysterious influences may cross and pervade the
system, and send through it, as it were, a nostalgia for femininity, for that placid, motherly,
comfortable fullness of life proper to the generous female.

15 Had the unborn Oliver decided to be a girl, he – or rather she – could hardly have been
blamed. Such a result would have been equally involuntary, equally normal, equally useful; yet
somehow it would have been disappointing. Our admirably gentle and admirably stern Oliver
Alden, always choosing the darker and the ruder duty, would have missed existence. Or he
would have begun – and how wrong that would have been! – by cheating his mother's hopes.

20 Because while Mrs. Alden always declared that women were intellectually the equals of men and
morally their superiors, yet she would have felt that a little girl was only a second-best baby: and
how ill that would have gone with her settled determination that everything in her new life –
except perhaps her husband – should be absolutely first rate! No: Providence was rewarding her
for aiming high.

25 The child was a fine boy, full weight, perfectly formed, fair-skinned with large grey eyes,
and a little fuzz of limp, yellow hair. At the first contact with freedom he wagged his arms and
legs about vigorously, experimentally, silently: he seemed ready for everything, anxious for
nothing, willing to wait and see. Philosophy possessed the soul of this child from his first breath:
inarticulately, of course, as it was destined, at bottom, to remain always; because the words
30 which his education supplied were not capable of uttering it truly. But in action, in
determination, and by a sort of inner blind fortitude, his faith was distinctly in him from the
beginning. There were good things and there were bad things, and there was an equal duty to
pull through both and come out somehow on the further side of all trouble. At least, so I venture
to put it into words for him, words which wouldn't have satisfied him; but at this first moment of
35 his existence I may presume to understand him better than he understood himself.

George Santayana from *The Last Puritan* (1935)

PASSAGE 49

Wild Bees

Often in summer, on a tarred bridge plank standing,
Or downstream between willows, a safe Ophelia¹ drifting
In a rented boat – I had seen them come and go,
Those wild bees swift as tigers, their gauze wings a-glitter
5 In passionless industry, clustering black at the crevice
Of a rotten cabbage tree, where their hive was hidden low.

But never strolled too near. Till one half-cloudy evening
Of ripe January, my friends and I
Came, gloved and masked to the eyes like plundering desperadoes,

10 To smoke them out. Quiet beside the stagnant river
 We trod wet grasses down, hearing the crickets chitter
 And waiting for light to drain from the wounded sky.

Before we reached the hive their sentries saw us
 And sprang invisible through the darkening air,
 15 Stabbed, and died in stinging. The hive woke. Poisonous fuming
 Of sulphur filled the hollow trunk, and crawling
 Blue flame sputtered – yet still their suicidal
 Live raiders dived and clung to our hands and hair.

O it was Carthage under Roman torches,
 20 Or loud with flames and falling timber, Troy!²
 A job well botched. Half of the honey melted
 And half the rest young grubs. Through earth-black smoldering ashes
 And maimed bees groaning, we drew out our plunder.
 Little enough their gold, and slight our joy.

25 Fallen then the city of instinctive wisdom.
 Tragedy is written distinct and small:
 A hive burned on a cool night in summer.
 But loss is a precious stone to me, a nectar
 Distilled in time, preaching the truth of winter
 30 To the fallen heart that does not cease to fall.

James K. Baxter, from *Collected Poems* (1984)

¹ Ophelia, in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, went mad through love and drowned herself in a river.

² Carthage and Troy: two Ancient Greek cities which burned to the ground.

PASSAGE 50

The ship sank.¹ It made a sound like a monstrous metallic burp. Things bubbled at the surface and then vanished. Everything was screaming: the sea, the wind, my heart. From the lifeboat I saw something in the water.

I cried, 'Richard Parker, is that you? It is so hard to see. Oh, that this rain would stop!
 5 Richard Parker? Richard Parker? Yes, it is you!'
 I could see his head. He was struggling to stay at the surface of the water.
 'Jesus, Mary, Muhammad and Vishnu, how good to see you, Richard Parker! Don't give up, please. Come to the lifeboat. Do you hear this whistle? TREEEEEE! TREEEEEE! TREEEEEE!
 You heard right. Swim, swim! You're a strong swimmer. It's not a hundred feet.'

10 He had seen me. He looked panic-stricken. He started swimming my way. The water about him was shifting wildly. He looked small and helpless.
 'Richard Parker, can you believe what has happened to us? Tell me it's a bad dream. Tell me it's not real. Tell me I'm still in my bunk on the *Tsimtsum* and I'm tossing and turning and soon I'll wake up from this nightmare. Tell me I'm still happy. Mother, my tender guardian
 15 angel of wisdom, where are you? And you, Father, my loving worrywart? And you, Ravi²,

dazzling hero of my childhood? Vishnu preserve me, Allah protect me, Christ save me, I can't bear it! TREEEEEE! TREEEEEE! TREEEEEE!

I was not wounded in any part of my body, but I had never experienced such intense pain, such a ripping of the nerves, such an ache of the heart.

20 He would not make it. He would drown. He was hardly moving forward and his movements were weak. His nose and mouth kept dipping underwater. Only his eyes were steadily on me.

'What are you doing, Richard Parker? Don't you love life? Keep swimming then! TREEEEEE! TREEEEEE! TREEEEEE! Kick with your legs. Kick! Kick! Kick!'

He stirred in the water and made to swim.

25 'And what of my extended family – birds, beasts and reptiles? They too have drowned. Every single thing I value in life has been destroyed. And I am allowed no explanation? I am to suffer hell without any account from heaven? In that case, what is the purpose of reason, Richard Parker? Is it no more than to shine at practicalities – the getting of food, clothing and shelter? Why can't reason give greater answers? Why can we throw a question further than we can pull in an answer? Why such a vast net if there's so little fish to catch?

30 His head was barely above water. He was looking up, taking in the sky one last time. There was a lifebuoy in the boat with a rope tied to it. I took hold of it and waved it in the air.

'Do you see this lifebuoy, Richard Parker? Do you see it? Catch hold of it. HUMPF! I'll try again. HUMPF!'

35 He was too far. But the sight of the lifebuoy flying his way gave him hope. He revived and started beating the water with vigorous, desperate strokes.

'That's right! One, two. One, two. One, two. Breathe when you can. Watch for the waves. TREEEEEE! TREEEEEE! TREEEEEE!'

40 My heart was chilled to ice. I felt ill with grief. But there was no time for frozen shock. It was shock in activity. Something in me did not want to give up on life, was unwilling to let go, wanted to fight to the very end. Where that part of me got the heart, I don't know.

'Isn't it ironic, Richard Parker? We're in hell yet we're still afraid of immortality. Look how close you are! TREEEEEE! TREEEEEE! TREEEEEE! Hurrah, hurrah! You've made it, Richard Parker, you've made it. Catch! HUMPF!'

45 I threw the lifebuoy mightily. It fell in the water right in front of him. With his last energies he stretched forward and took hold of it.

'Hold on tight, I'll pull you in. Don't let go. Pull with your eyes while I pull with my hands. In a few seconds you'll be aboard and we'll be together. Wait a second. Together? We'll be *together*? Have I gone mad?'

50 I woke up to what I was doing. I yanked on the rope.

'Let go of that lifebuoy, Richard Parker! Let go, I said. I don't want you here, do you understand? Go somewhere else. Leave me alone. Get lost. Drown! Drown!'

He was kicking vigorously with his legs. I grabbed an oar. I thrust it at him, meaning to push him away. I missed and lost hold of the oar.

55 I grabbed another oar. I dropped it in an oarlock and pulled as hard as I could, meaning to move the lifeboat away. All I accomplished was to turn the lifeboat a little. Bringing one end closer to Richard Parker.

I would hit him on the head! I lifted the oar in the air.

He was too fast. He reached up and pulled himself aboard.

60 'Oh my God!'

Ravi was right. Truly I was to be the next goat. I had a wet, trembling, half-drowned, heaving and coughing three-year-old adult Bengal tiger in my lifeboat. Richard Parker rose unsteadily to his feet on the tarpaulin, eyes blazing as they met mine, ears laid tight to his head,

all weapons drawn. His head was the size and the colour of the lifebuoy, with teeth.
65 I turned around, stepped over the zebra and threw myself overboard.

Yann Martel, *Life of Pi* (2001)

¹ The narrator is on board a ship (the *Tsimtsum*) transporting zoo animals when it sinks in mid-ocean

² The storyteller's brother

PASSAGE 51

Planting a Sequoia¹

All afternoon my brothers and I have worked in the orchard,
Digging this hole, laying you into it, carefully packing the soil.
Rain blackened the horizon, but cold winds kept it over the Pacific,
And the sky above us stayed the dull gray
5 Of an old year coming to an end.

In Sicily a father plants a tree to celebrate his first son's birth –
An olive or a fig tree – a sign that the earth has one more life to bear.
I would have done the same, proudly laying new stock into my father's orchard,
A green sapling rising among the twisted apple boughs,
10 A promise of new fruit in other autumns.

But today we kneel in the cold planting you, our native giant,
Defying the practical custom of our fathers,
Wrapping in your roots a lock of hair, a piece of an infant's birth cord,
All that remains above earth of a first-born son,
15 A few stray atoms brought back to the elements.

We will give you what we can – our labor and our soil,
Water drawn from the earth when the skies fail,
Nights scented with the ocean fog, days softened by the circuit of bees.
We plant you in the corner of the grove, bathed in western light,
20 A slender shoot against the sunset.

And when our family is no more, all of his unborn brothers dead,
Every niece and nephew scattered, the house torn down,
His mother's beauty ashes in the air,
I want you to stand among strangers, all young and ephemeral to you,
25 Silently keeping the secret of your birth.

Dana Gioia, from *The Gods of Winter* (1991)

¹ Giant fir tree

PASSAGE 52

She put a record on the turntable. The record player was still on the sideboard where it had been for years. Loyal studied the album cover; five men in musician's chairs, a swirl of yellow color coming from their hands to the top of the cover and red letters bursting, "MUSIC TO SING ALONG WITH - Volume 7 - Country Ballads."

5 The record rotated, double-stop fiddle harmonies of a sentimental country song filled the room. Starr stood in front of the oven, feet side by side, hands folded in a knot of fingers, held in front of her crotch. Middle-aged, in wrinkled whipcords and a sweatshirt, but something of the old vulnerable beauty persisting. Perhaps she knew it.

10 She counted silently, then sang "He was just passing through, I was all alone and blue." The words forced themselves up into her nose, she reached for the cheap sadness. Loyal couldn't help it, felt the barroom tears jerking out of his eyes. That song always got to him, but here he had to sit in a damn kitchen chair, couldn't even hunch over a beer. So he closed his eyes and wished Jack had lived.

15 The quiche was good, and they ate all of it. It was easier now, no talking, the food on the plates, the forks spearing and lifting. She put a paper napkin near his hand. Jack's chair was empty. Pickles. The coffee perked. How many times had he sat here?

"So, what do you think of my singing, Loyal?"

That was the kind of question he couldn't answer.

"It's fine. I like it fine."

20 Sour face. She poured coffee while his fingers pinched up crumbs in the quiche dish. All of Jack's things were scattered around as if he'd just stepped out. Well, that's all he'd done, just stepped out. The rope he knotted while they watched television on a peg by the door, a pair of boots, stiff now from disuse. Bills still on the Victorian spindle. The grey rancher's hat, the band stained with Jack's sweat, on top of the side board where he always slung it when he came in for dinner.

25 "Think you might go back to Wisconsin, see your kids? Must be all grown up now."

"Them ties was cut too long ago. With blunt scissors." She said the milk was on the turn.

He smelled it and said he'd take his coffee without.

30 "I know I'm not going to sing at any rodeo, Loyal. My voice is weak, I'm too old. Old ladies don't sing at rodeos. But you know, I don't feel old. I feel like I've got the liveliest part of my life still ahead. I could stay on the ranch, Loyal, but not alone. A man is needed." She couldn't say it much clearer.

The coffee. Its blackness in the familiar blue cups. He stirred in sugar. Her spoon clinked.

35 Then all at once the awkwardness was gone. Stories of things he had seen began to pour out, the words firing from between his loosened and gapped teeth. He told her about Cucumber drowning in a mine, midnight driving with Bullet over dangerous passes where headlights failed, the mountain lion. He, who had talked little, talked much, swelled to a glowing huckster selling stories of his life. At two in the morning, Starr nodding off, wanting nothing but sleep and silence, he stopped. They were tired of each other, each longed for the relief of solitude. He said

40 he would sleep on the daybed beside the stove. The kitchen stank of cigarettes.

In the morning she gave him Jack's pearl gray cowboy hat.

E. Annie Proulx, *Postcards* (1992)

PASSAGE 53

Brainstorm

The house was shaken by a rising wind
That rattled window and door. He sat alone
In an upstairs room and heard these things: a blind
Ran up with a bang, a door slammed, a groan
5 Came from some hidden joist, a leaky tap
At any silence of the wind walked like
A blind man through the house. Timber and sap
Revolt, he thought, from washer, baulk and spike.
Bent to his book, continued unafraid
10 Until the crows came down from their loud flight
To walk along the roof-tree overhead.
Their horny feet, so near but out of sight,
Scratched on the slate; when they were blown away
He heard their wings beat till they came again,
15 While the wind rose, and the house seemed to sway,
And window panes began to blind with rain.
The house was talking, not to him, he thought,
But to the crows; the crows were talking back
In their black voices. The secret might be out:
20 Houses are only trees stretched on the rack.
And once the crows knew, all nature would know.
Fur, leaf and feather would invade the form,
Nail rust with rain and shingle warp with snow,
Vine tear the wall, till any straw-borne storm
25 Could rip both roof and roof-tree off and show
Naked to nature what they had kept warm.
He came to feel the crows walk on his head
As if he were the house, their crooked feet
Scratched, through his hair, his scalp. He might be dead,
30 It seemed, and all the noises underneath
Be but the cooling of the sinews, veins,
Juices, and sodden sacks suddenly let go;
While in his ruins of wiring, his burst mains,
The rainy wind had been set free to blow
35 Until the green uprising and mob rule
That ran the world had taken over him,
Split him like seed, and set him in the school
Where any crutch can learn to be a limb.

Inside his head he heard the stormy crows.

Howard Nemerov, *New and Selected Poems* (1960)

PASSAGE 54

“I give up,” said Jo. “We seem to lose ground every time. We dig her out, then she crawls back in, only deeper.”

Linda loyally and staunchly defended the fortress in which her mother seemed to have taken refuge.

5 Jo defiantly wanted to break through. “Like shock treatment,” she said. “It’s the only way to bring her out.”

Sharon, the middle daughter, gave her mother a loom.

And so, late in life, she took up weaving. She attended a class and took detailed notes, then followed them step by step, bending to the loom with painstaking attention, threading the warp
10 tirelessly, endlessly winding, threading, tying. She made sampler after sampler, using the subdued, muted colours she liked: Five inches of one weave, two inches of another, just as the teacher instructed.

For a year she wove samplers, geometric and repetitious, all in browns and neutral shades, the colors she preferred. She was fascinated by some of the more advanced techniques she began
15 to learn. One could pick up threads from the warp selectively, so there could be a color on the warp that never appeared in the fabric if it were not picked up and woven into the fabric. This phenomenon meant she could show a flash of color, repeated flashes of the color, or never show it at all. The color would still be there, startling the eye when the piece was turned over. The backside would reveal long lengths of a color that simply hadn’t been picked up from the warp
20 and didn’t appear at all in the right side of the fabric.

She took to her loom with new excitement, threading the warp with all the shades of her life: Gray, for the cold, foggy mornings when she had, piece by piece, warmed little clothes by the heater vent as Jo, four, stood shivering in her underwear; brown, the color of the five lunch bags she packed each morning with a sandwich, cut in half and wrapped in waxed paper, napkin, fruit,
25 and potato chips; Dark brown, like the brownies they had baked “to make Daddy come home” from business trips – Sharon and Jo had believed he really could smell them, because he always came home.

Now when the daughters came home they always found something new she had woven. Linda dropped by almost every week to leave her own daughter, Terry, at “Bachan’s house”
30 before dashing off to work. When Linda’s husband came to pick her up, Terry never wanted to leave “Bachi” and would cling to her, crying at the door.

She continued to weave: White, the color of five sets of sheets, which she had washed, hung out, and ironed each week – also the color of the bathroom sink and the lather of shampoo against four small black heads; blue, Cathy’s favorite color.

35 Sharon came by from time to time, usually to do a favour or bring a treat. She would cook Mexican food or borrow a tool or help trim trees in the garden. She was frustrated with the public school system where she had been substitute teaching and was now working part time in a gallery.

Sometimes Sharon bought yarn for her mother to weave: Golden brown, the color of the
40 Central Valley in summer. The family had driven through the valley on their way to the mountains almost every summer. They would arrive hot and sweating and hurry into the cool, emerald green waters of the Merced river. The children’s floats flashed yellow on the dark green water. Yellow, too, were the beaten eggs fried flat, rolled, and eaten cold, with dark brown pickled vegetables and white rice balls. She always sat in the shade.

45 Jo was working abroad and usually came home to visit once a year. She and Michael had broken up. During the visits the house would fill with Jo and her friends. They would sit in the

back room to talk. Jo visited her mother's weaving class and met her weaving friends.

"So this is the daughter," one of them said. "Your mother's been looking forward to your visit. She never misses a class except when her daughters are home."

50 Soon it was time for Jo to leave again. "Mom's colors," she remarked to Sharon as she fingered the brown muffler her mother had woven for her.

"Put it on," said Sharon.

Jo did, and as she moved toward the light, hidden colors leaped from the brown fabric. It came alive in the sunlight.

55 "You know, there's actually red in here," she marveled, "and even bits of green. You'd never know it unless you looked real close."

"Most people don't," Sharon said.

The two sisters fell silent, sharing a rare moment together before their lives diverged again. The muffler was warm about Jo's neck.

60 At the airport, Jo's mother stood next to Jo's father, leaning slightly toward him as an object of lighter mass naturally tends toward a more substantial one. She was crying.

When Jo was gone she returned to the house, and her loom. And amidst the comings and goings of the lives around her, she sat, a woman bent over a loom, weaving the diverse threads of life into one miraculous, mystical fabric with timeless care.

R L Sasaki, *The Loom* (1989)

PASSAGE 55

The Wasps' Nest

Two aerial tigers,
Striped in ebony and gold
And resonantly, savagely a-hum,
Have lately come
5 To my mailbox's metal hold
And thought
With paper and with mud
Therein to build
Their insubstantial and their only home.
10 Neither the sore displeasure
Of the U.S. Mail
Nor all my threats and warnings
Will avail
To turn them from their hummed devotions.
15 And I think
They know my strength,
Can gauge
The danger of their work:
One blow could crush them
20 And their nest; and I am not their friend.
And yet they seem
Too deeply and too fiercely occupied
To bother to attend.

Perhaps they sense
 25 I'll never deal the blow,
 For, though I am not in nor of them,
 Still I think I know
 What it is like to live
 In an alien and gigantic universe, a stranger,
 30 Building the fragile citadels of love
 On the edge of danger.

James L Rosenberg, *The Albemarle Book of Modern Verse* (1962)

Guiding Questions for Section Five Passages

PASSAGE 36: *The Idea of Perfection*, Kate Grenville

- o Show how the passage's focus on setting moves from broad to narrow, superficial to analytical and casual to intense. (*Setting*)
- o What impressions do we gain of the central character, and of the reasons for her behaviour? (*Character, Action*)
- o Explore the passage's visual impact. (*Style*)
- o What issues (social, philosophical or artistic) does the passage raise? (*Ideas*)

PASSAGE 37: *Otherwise*, Cilla McQueen

- o Show how the poem moves back and forward between two settings, local and universal. (*Setting*)
- o What do we learn about the relationship between the two people in the poem, and about their situation? (*Character, Action*)
- o What do you find interesting about the way the poem is written? (*Style*)
- o In what way is the poem an expression of optimism? (*Ideas*)

PASSAGE 38: from *John Dollar*, Marianne Wiggins

- o How does the writer use details of the surroundings to indicate something of the predicament the girls find themselves in? (*Setting, Action*)
- o What do we gather about the age of the girls and their relationships? (*Character*)
- o How does the style the writer adopts convey the intensity of this experience? (*Style*)
- o What does the passage suggest about how human beings react to disaster? (*Ideas*)

PASSAGE 39: *Parachute*, Lenrie Peters

- o What does the poem suggest about the relationship of Man with his environment? (*Setting*)
- o How far does the person writing the poem speak convincingly and with authority? (*Character*)
- o Show how the poem's structure is aligned to its narrative (*Action*)
- o How does the writer bring the experience of a parachute fall alive for us? (*Style*)
- o What general conclusions about life does the poet seek to draw from his account of parachuting? (*Ideas*)

PASSAGE 40: from *Bad Blood*, Lorna Sage

- o What do we learn from the passage about the community (including the school community) in which the writer grew up? (*Setting, Ideas*)
- o Explore the writer's attitude towards Gail. (*Character*)
- o Discuss the way the narrative moves backwards and forwards through time. (*Action*)
- o Show how description and analysis are effectively interwoven in the passage. (*Style*)

PASSAGE 41: *Two Hands*, Jon Stallworthy

- o In what way is the setting (two rooms at opposite ends of a house) appropriate to the situation depicted in the passage? (*Setting*)
- o 'Both a tribute and an expression of dissatisfaction.' Discuss this comment on the passage. (*Character*)
- o What can we gather from the passage about the writer's intentions? (*Action*)
- o Explore the way the writer uses verb tenses to help express his feelings. (*Style*)
- o What do the physical objects mentioned in the poem represent, beyond themselves? (*Ideas*)

PASSAGE 42: from *The Book of Saladin*, Tariq Ali

- o What do we learn from the passage about the values and customs of the society to which the narrator belongs? (*Setting*)
- o How does the narrator seek to present himself, as a person, to his listener? (*Character*)
- o How does the writer of the passage (as opposed to the narrator) make use of the story within the story? (*Action*)
- o What subtleties do you notice in what is essentially a simple narrative style? (*Style*)
- o What does the passage suggest about how we see, and respond to, other people? (*Ideas*)

PASSAGE 43: *Summer Solstice, Batticaloa, Sri Lanka*, Marilyn Krysl

- o Discuss the interplay of the three concentric rings the writer finds herself at the centre of – the beach, the war, creation. (*Setting*)
- o Why could this poem have been named 'Departure and Return'? (*Character, Action*)
- o What do the comparisons add to the poem's meaning and effect? (*Style*)
- o How are war, and this particular war, represented in the poem? (*Ideas*)

PASSAGE 44: from *The Nine Tailors*, Dorothy L Sayers

- o What features of the bell tower may symbolise the general situation Wimsey finds himself in? (*Setting*)
- o How would you describe Wimsey's state of mind? (*Character*)
- o By what methods does the writer seek to convey the intensity of Wimsey's experience? (*Style*)
- o What would you regard as the ironies of the passage? (*Action, Ideas*)

PASSAGE 45: *Child and Insect*, Robert Druce

- o What does the poem suggest about the relationship between the child and his mother? (*Character*)
- o Discuss the poem's sudden changes of direction. (*Action*)

- o Show how the poet uses language (both in his choice of words and in their layout) to capture the drama of the episode. (*Style*)
- o What lesson or lessons may the child take from his experience? (*Setting, Ideas*)

PASSAGE 46: from *Back*, Henry Green

- o How does the writer use the setting of this episode to convey his central character's state of mind? (*Setting, Character*)
- o Are there any indications in the passage of how the story may develop beyond this point? (*Action*)
- o How does the passage's style contribute to its atmosphere of drama and high emotion? (*Style*)
- o What does the passage suggest about life, death, love and war? (*Ideas*)

PASSAGE 47: *Night Wind*, Christopher Dewdney

- o How does the poet convey a sense of vast scale in the poem's setting? (*Setting*)
- o What force in his life does the night wind represent, for the poet? (*Character, Ideas*)
- o Discuss the suggestion that the poem describes a lot of events but that nothing really happens. (*Action*)
- o Consider the contribution the poem's verbs make to its overall effect. (*Style*)

PASSAGE 48: from *The Last Puritan*, George Santayana

- o What impression do we get of the kind of world the child is being born into? (*Setting*)
- o For what kind of behaviour in Oliver's later life does the story of his birth seem to be preparing us? (*Character, Action*)
- o By what stylistic means does the storyteller seek to show that he writes with authority? (*Style*)
- o Show how in this passage the author strives to be fair to both sexes, and not offend either. (*Ideas*)

PASSAGE 49: *Wild Bees*, James K Baxter

- o Show how in the opening two stanzas the poet uses seemingly irrelevant detail to help establish the poem's early mood. (*Setting*)
- o What feelings does the poet have about this episode, looking back on it? (*Character*)
- o What elements of the poem's style contribute to our sense that this is both a dramatic event and one of large significance? (*Style, Action*)
- o What, in this poem, is lost, and what is gained? (*Ideas*)

PASSAGE 50: from *Life of Pi*, Yann Martel

- o How does the absence of detail in the setting increase the focus of the passage? (*Setting*)
- o The narrator addresses a wide range of other beings (people, gods, religious figures, animals). What do we gather about him from the things he says to them, and the way he says them? (*Character, Style*)
- o How does the writer convey the difficulties and drama of this whole episode? (*Action*)
- o Explore the conflicts and contradictions in the passage (*Ideas*)

PASSAGE 51: *Planting a Sequoia*, Dana Gioia

- o What do you find appropriate to the poem as a whole about where and when the tree is being planted? (*Setting*)
- o What feelings is the poet seeking to express? (*Character*)
- o Show how the poet subtly introduces, then confirms, the reasons for this planting. (*Action*)
- o What is the effect of the poet's use of the second person ('you', 'your') to address the tree? (*Style*)
- o What does the poem suggest about human life? (*Ideas*)

PASSAGE 52: from *Postcards*, E Annie Proulx

- o Discuss the writer's use of physical detail. (*Setting*)
- o What impression are we given of Starr, at this point in her life? (*Character*)
- o Explain how the writer conveys the tensions and conflicts that arise as these two people move into a new stage in their relationship. (*Action*)
- o Show how the awkwardness of the situation is reflected in the awkwardness of the passage's style in both the dialogue and the narrative. (*Style*)
- o What does the passage have to say about human needs? (*Ideas*)

PASSAGE 53: *Brainstorm*, Howard Nemerov

- o What sort of place is the World, as represented in this poem? (*Setting*)
- o Trace the changes in the central character's mood as the poem progresses. (*Character*)
- o Show how the poet conveys the sense that the storm is increasing throughout the poem (*Action*)
- o What effects of sound has the poet aimed for, and with what intention? In your response consider the poem's diction, rhyme and rhythm. (*Style*)
- o Discuss the significance of the poem's title. (*Ideas*)

PASSAGE 54: from *The Loom*, R L Sasaki

- o How does the writer convey a sense of family, and community? (*Setting*)
- o Why does her weaving come to mean so much to the girls' mother? (*Character*)
- o We may be surprised to find, in line 60, that the girl's father is still alive. Why is that? (*Action*)
- o What do the many references to colour contribute to the passage? (*Style*)
- o What does the passage suggest about human creativity and the artistic process? (*Ideas*)

PASSAGE 55: *The Wasps' Nest*, James L Rosenberg

- o What parallels does the poet draw between the world the wasps find themselves in and his own? (*Setting, Ideas*)
- o What attitudes and characteristics (shared or not) are demonstrated by the wasps, the U.S. Mail Service, and the poet? (*Character, Ideas*)
- o What do you find interesting or effective about the tenses of the poem's verbs? (*Action, Style*)
- o Discuss the poet's line divisions and the distribution of his rhymes. (*Style*)

Section Six: Practice (Mock) Examinations

Both Examination A and Examination B are suitable for SL and HL practice.

Taking the exam:

- o Choose a block of time (Standard Level one-and-a-half hours, Higher Level two hours) during which you will not be disturbed.
- o Find a quiet place and set it up as nearly as you can to resemble an examination room, with
 - an upright chair and a table with a good writing surface
 - appropriate temperature and lighting
 - a watch or clock
 - sufficient paper and pens, including coloured felt tips to help you mark the passage.
- o When you are ready, note the time (write it down) and the time you will need to finish (write it down).
- o Begin.

Choosing the passage:

- o Don't decide ahead of time to write about the prose or the poetry passage.
- o Read both passages carefully before you choose one.
- o Don't automatically choose the one which is easier to understand – there may be less to say about it.
- o When you have made a preliminary choice, read that passage (and maybe the other one) again before you begin work – just to make sure. A mistake now can cost a lot later.
- o If, when you've begun to make notes on the passage you've chosen, you feel to be getting nowhere, consider changing to the other passage. You shouldn't do so, however, after anything more than say ten minutes: stick with your original choice, and you'll find that more ideas come once you start writing.

Making notes:

- o Use the margins of the passage itself.
- o Underline or circle details in the passage you think are significant, and link them to your margin notes.
- o SL candidates: consider colour-coding (or number-coding) the parts of the passage you think will help you answer each of the guiding questions.
- o HL candidates: if you have a structure you intend to use in your commentary (like the one we will suggest later) consider colour-coding (or number-coding) details from the passage to match your structure.

Writing the commentary:

- o You will not have time to write your commentary in draft form and then copy it out again. So write carefully and legibly.
- o Leave time at the end to read through what you have written.

Evaluating your answer (when it's all over):

There are suggestions for doing that on pages.

If any of the above contradicts what your teacher has suggested, follow your teacher's advice. He or she knows you better than we do...

Mock Examination A

Instructions to candidates

Standard Level (1 hour 30 minutes): Write a commentary on one passage only. It is not compulsory for you to respond directly to the guiding questions provided. However, you are encouraged to use them as starting points for your commentary. (Guiding questions for Standard Level candidates can be found on page 138.)

Higher Level (2 hours): Write a commentary on one passage only.
(*HL candidates: Do not look at the SL guiding questions on page 138. You may however use them after you have completed your commentary, to check that you have covered the areas the examiner has thought important.*)

1. (a)

The gaunt building stood on rock. The distinctive feature was a window flanked by two smaller ones, as an adult might stand with protective arms around children's shoulders. Fan lights over the door. Quoyle noticed half the panes were gone. Paint flaked from wood. Holes in the roof. The bay rolled and rolled.

5 'Miracle it's standing. That roofline is as straight as a ruler,' the aunt said. Trembling.

'Let's see how it is inside,' said Quoyle. 'For all we know the floors have fallen into the cellar.'

10 The aunt laughed. 'Not likely,' she shouted joyfully. 'There isn't any cellar.' The house was lashed with cable to iron rings set in the rock. Streaks of rust, notched foot-holds in the stone like steps, crevices deep enough to hide a child. The cables bristled with broken wires.

15 'Top of the rock not quite level,' the aunt said, her sentences flying out like ribbons on a pole. 'Before my time, but they said it rocked in storms like a big rocking chair, back and forth. Made the women sick, afraid, so they lashed it down and it doesn't move an inch but the wind singing through those cables makes a noise you don't forget. Oh, do I remember it in the winter storms. Like a moaning.' For the house was garlanded with wind. 'That's one reason I was glad when we moved over to Capsize Cove. There was a store at Capsize and that was a big thing. But then we shifted down the coast to Catspaw, and a year later we were off to the States.' Told herself to calm down.

20 Rusted twenty-penny nails; planks over the ground-floor windows. Quoyle hooked his fingers under the window planks and heaved. Like pulling on the edge of the world.

'There's a hammer in the car,' he said. 'Under the seat. Maybe a pry bar. I'll go back and get them. And the food. We can make a picnic breakfast.'

25 The aunt was remembering a hundred things. 'I was born here,' she said. 'Born in this house.' Other rites had occurred here as well.

'Me too,' said Sunshine, blowing at a mosquito on her hand. Bunny slapped at it. Harder than necessary.

'No you weren't. You were born in Mockingburg, New York. There's smoke over there,' she said, looking across the bay. 'Something's on fire.'

30 'It's chimney smoke from the houses in Killick-Claw. They're cooking their breakfasts over there. Porridge and hotcakes. See the fishing boat out in the middle of the bay? See it going along?'

'I wanna see it,' said Sunshine. 'I can't see it. I can't SEE it.'

‘You stop that howling or you’ll see your bottom warmed,’ said the aunt. Face red in the wind. Quoyle remembered himself crying ‘I can’t see it,’ to a math teacher who turned away, gave no
35 answers. The fog tore apart, light charged the sea like blue neon.

The wood, hardened by time and corroding weather, clenched the nails fast. They came out crying. He wrenched the latch but could not open the door until he worked the tire iron into the crack and forced it.

40 Dark except for the blinding rectangle streaming through the open door. Echo of boards dropping on rock. Light shot through glass in slices, landed on the dusty floors like strips of yellow canvas. The children ran in and out the door, afraid to go into the gloom alone, shrieking as Quoyle, levering boards outside, gave ghostly laughs and moans, ‘Huu huu huu.’

45 Then inside, the aunt climbing the funneled stairs, Quoyle testing floorboards, saying be careful, be careful. Dust charged the air and they were all sneezing. Cold, must; canted doors on loose hinges. The stair treads concave from a thousand shuffling climbs and descents. Wallpaper poured backwards off the walls. In the attic a featherbed leaking bird down, ticking mapped with stains. The children rushed from room to room. Even when fresh the rooms must have been mean and hopeless.

50 ‘That’s one more dollar for me!’ shrieked Bunny, whirling on gritty floor. But through the windows the cool plain of sea.

Quoyle went back out. The wind as sweet in his nose as spring water in a thirsty mouth. The aunt coughing and half-crying inside.

55 ‘There’s the table, the blessed table, the old chairs, the stove is here, oh my lord, there’s the broom on the wall where it always hung,’ and she seized the wooden handle. The rotted knot burst, straws shot out of the binding wire and the aunt held a stick. She saw the stovepipe was rusted through, the table on ruined legs, the chairs unfit.

60 ‘Needs a good scurrifunging. What mother always said.’ Now she roved the rooms, turned over pictures that spit broken glass. Held up a memorial photograph of a dead woman, eyes half open, wrists bound with strips of white cloth. The wasted body lay on the kitchen table, coffin against the wall.

‘Aunt Eltie. She died of TB.’ Held up another of a fat woman grasping a hen.

‘Aunt Pinkie. She was so stout she couldn’t get down to the chamber pot and had to set it on the bed before she could pee.’

65 Square rooms, lofty ceilings. Light dribbled like water through a hundred sparkling holes in the roof, caught on splinters. This bedroom. Where she knew the pattern of cracks on the ceiling better than any other fact in her life. Couldn’t bear to look. Downstairs again she touched a paint-slobbered chair, saw the foot knobs on the front legs worn to rinds. The floorboards slanted under her feet, wood as bare as skin. A rock smoothed by the sea for doorstep. And three lucky stones strung on a wire to keep the house safe.

The Shipping News, E Annie Proulx

1. (b)

Twice Shy

Her scarf *à la* Bardot,
In suede flats for the walk,
She came with me one evening
For air and friendly talk.
5 We crossed the quiet river,
Took the embankment walk.

Traffic holding its breath,
Sky a tense diaphragm:
Dusk hung like a backcloth
10 That shook where a swan swam,
Tremulous as a hawk
Hanging deadly, calm.

A vacuum of need
Collapsed each hunting heart
15 But tremulously we held
As hawk and prey apart,
Preserved classic decorum,
Deployed our talk with art.

Our juvenilia¹
20 Had taught us both to wait,
Not to publish feeling
And regret it all too late –
Mushroom loves already
Had puffed and burst in hate.

25 So, chary and excited
As a thrush linked on a hawk,
We thrilled to the March twilight
With nervous childish talk:
Still waters running deep
30 Along the embankment walk.

Seamus Heaney

¹*Juvenilia: an author's early writings*

Guiding Questions for Standard Level Candidates Only

1. (a) *The Shipping News*

Explore both the house's character and its setting.

What do we learn about the people in the passage from their differing reactions to the house?

What contribution do the writer's comparisons make to the passage?

How adequate would *A Return to the Past* be as a title for the extract?

1. (b) *Twice Shy*


In what ways are the details of the poem's setting important?

Show how the poet captures the tension and uncertainty in the relationship between the two characters.

Show how elements in the poem's style help bind it together.

What does the poem's title suggest as its central idea?

End of Examination



When you have completed your commentary, take a long break before you begin to think about how well you may have done. When you are ready (and not necessarily today) you can go to the Mock Examinations section of the Answer Booklet and look at our suggestions for evaluating your answers.

(You may like to exchange your work with another student who has written about the same passage, so that you can discuss the quality of each other's commentaries.)

The pages below have been left blank so that this copy of the Handbook remains aligned with the Teaching Copy.

Mock Examination B

Instructions to candidates

Standard Level (1 hour 30 minutes): Write a commentary on one passage only. It is not compulsory for you to respond directly to the guiding questions provided. However, you are encouraged to use them as starting points for your commentary. (Guiding questions for Standard Level candidates can be found on page 146.)

Higher Level (2 hours): Write a commentary on one passage only. (*HL candidates: Do not look at the SL guiding questions on page 146. You may however use them after you have completed your commentary, to check that you have covered the areas the examiner has thought important.*)

1. (a)

All morning Buddy had been teaching me how to ski.

First, Buddy borrowed skis and ski poles from a friend of his in the village, and ski boots from a doctor's wife whose feet were only one size larger than my own, and a red ski jacket from a student nurse. His persistence in the face of mulishness was astounding.

5 Then I remembered that at medical school Buddy had won a prize for persuading the most relatives of dead people to have their dead ones cut up whether they needed it or not, in the interests of science. I forget what the prize was, but I could just see Buddy in his white coat with his stethoscope sticking out of a side pocket like part of his anatomy, smiling and bowing and in my tracks, flushed and panting.

10 'But Buddy, I don't know how to zigzag yet. All those people coming down from the top know how to talking those numb, dumb relatives into signing the post-mortem papers.

Next, Buddy borrowed a car from his own doctor, who'd had TB himself and was very understanding, and we drove off as the buzzer for walk-hour rasped along the sunless sanatorium corridors.

15 Buddy had never skied before either, but he said that the elementary principles were quite simple, and as he'd often watched the ski instructors and their pupils he could teach me all I'd need to know.

For the first half-hour I obediently herring-boned up a small slope, pushed off with my poles and coasted straight down,' he observed, as I negotiated my slope for the twentieth time. 'Now let's try you on the rope tow.'

20 I stopped zigzag.'

'Oh, you need only go half-way. Then you won't gain very much momentum.'

And Buddy accompanied me to the rope tow and showed me how to let the rope run through my hands, and then told me to close my fingers round it and go up.

25 It never occurred to me to say no.

I wrapped my fingers around the rough, bruising snake of a rope that slithered through them, and went up.

But the rope dragged me, wobbling and balancing, so rapidly I couldn't hope to dissociate myself from it half-way.

30 There was a skier in front of me and a skier behind me, and I'd have been knocked over and stuck full of skis and poles the minute I let go, and I didn't want to make trouble, so I hung quietly on.

At the top, though, I had second thoughts.

Buddy singled me out, hesitating there in the red jacket. His arms chopped the air like khaki

35 windmills. Then I saw he was signalling me to come down a path that had opened in the middle of the weaving skiers. But as I poised, uneasy, with a dry throat, the smooth white path from my feet to his feet grew blurred.

A skier crossed it from the left, another crossed it from the right, and Buddy's arms went on waving feebly as antennae from the other side of a field swarming with tiny moving animalcules
40 like germs, or bent, bright exclamation marks.

I looked up from that churning amphitheatre to the view beyond it.

The great, grey eye of the sky looked back at me, its mist-shrouded sun focusing all the white and silent distances that poured from every point of the compass, hill after pale hill, to stall at my feet.

45 The interior voice nagging me not to be a fool – to save my skin and take off my skis and walk down, camouflaged by the scrub pines bordering the slope – fled like a disconsolate mosquito. The thought that I might kill myself formed in my mind coolly as a tree or a flower.

I measured the distance to Buddy with my eye.

His arms were folded, now, and he seemed of a piece with the split-rail fence behind him –
50 numb, brown and inconsequential.

Edging to the rim of the hilltop, I dug the spikes of my poles into the snow and pushed myself into a flight I knew I couldn't stop by skill or any belated access of will.

I aimed straight down.

A keen wind that had been hiding itself struck me full in the mouth and raked the hair back
55 horizontal on my head. I was descending, but the white sun rose no higher. It hung over the suspended waves of the hills, an insentient pivot without which the world would not exist.

A small, answering point in my own body flew towards it. I felt my lungs inflate with the inrush of scenery – air, mountains, trees, people. I thought, 'This is what it is to be happy.'

I plummeted down past the zigzagers, the students, the experts, through year after year of
60 doubleness and smiles and compromise, into my own past.

People and trees receded on either hand like the dark sides of a tunnel as I hurtled on to the still, bright point at the end of it, the pebble at the bottom of the well, the white sweet baby cradled in its mother's belly.

My teeth crunched a gravelly mouthful. Ice water seeped down my throat.

65 Buddy's face hung over me, near and huge, like a distracted planet. Other faces showed themselves up in back of his. Behind them, black dots swarmed on a plane of whiteness. Piece by piece, as at the strokes of a dull godmother's wand, the old world sprang back into position.

'You were doing fine,' a familiar voice informed my ear, 'until that man stepped into your path.'

70 People were unfastening my bindings and collecting my ski poles from where they poked skyward, askew, in their separate snowbanks. The lodge fence propped itself at my back.

Buddy bent to pull off my boots and the several pairs of white wool socks that padded them. His plump hand shut on my left foot, then inched up my ankle, closing and probing, as if feeling for a concealed weapon.

75 A dispassionate white sun shone at the summit of the sky. I wanted to hone myself on it till I grew saintly and thin and essential as the blade of a knife.

'I'm going up,' I said. 'I'm going to do it again.'

'No, you're not.'

80 A queer, satisfied expression came over Buddy's face. 'No, you're not,' he repeated with a final smile. 'Your leg's broken in two places. You'll be stuck in a cast for months.'

from *The Bell Jar*, Sylvia Plath

1. (b)

The Woman at the Washington Zoo

The saris go by me from the embassies.

Cloth from the moon. Cloth from another planet.
They look back at the leopard like the leopard.

And I...

5 This print of mine, that has kept its color
Alive through so many cleanings; this dull null
Navy I wear to work, and wear from work, and so
To my bed, so to my grave, with no
Complaints, no comment; neither from my chief,
10 The Deputy Chief Assistant, nor his chief –
Only I complain; this serviceable
Body that no sunlight dyes, no hand suffuses
But, dome-shadowed, withering among columns,
Wavy beneath fountains – small, far-off, shining
15 In the eyes of animals, these beings trapped
As I am trapped but not, themselves, the trap,
Aging, but without knowledge of their age,
Kept safe here, knowing not of death, for death
– Oh, bars of my own body, open, open!

20 The world goes by my cage and never sees me.
And there come not to me, as come to these,
The wild beasts, sparrows pecking the llamas' grain,
Pigeons settling on the bears' bread, buzzards
Tearing the meat the flies have clouded...

25 Vulture,
When you come for the white rat that the foxes left,
Take off the red helmet of your head, the black
Wings that have shadowed me, and step to me as man,
The wild brother at whose feet the white wolves fawn,
30 To whose hand of power the great lioness
Stalks, purring...

 You know what I was,
You see what I am: change me, change me!

Randall Jarrell

Guiding Questions for Standard Level Candidates Only

1. (a) *The Bell Jar*

What do we learn from the passage about the two central characters, and about their relationship?

By what means does the writer control the narrative, and give it shape?

What contribution do the comparisons make to the passage?

The episode carries a significance for Esther which goes beyond the events themselves. Explore it.

1. (b) *The Woman at the Washington Zoo*

What significance lies in the fact that the poem is set in Washington?

What do we learn from the poem about the life the woman leads, and her feelings towards it?

Give a detailed account of the poem's structure and development.

Examine the poet's use of repetition.

End of Examination

When you have completed your commentary, take a long break before you begin to think about how well you may have done. When you are ready (and not necessarily on the same day) you can go to the Mock Examinations section of the Answer Booklet and look at our suggestions for evaluating your answers.

(You may decide to exchange your work with another student who has written about the same passage, so that you can discuss the quality of each other's commentaries.)

Here are three further exercises, based on Mock Examination B, you could undertake if you wished:

- o There's no question related directly to the Setting of the prose passage. Devise one, and make notes towards an answer.
- o The 'missing' item from the SCASI list in the questions on the poem is Ideas. Devise one, and make notes towards an answer.
- o Compare the two passages, prose and poem, under the headings Intention (what each writer is trying to do), Methods (how he/she is trying to do it) and Success (how thoroughly they have achieved their aims).

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Section Seven: Advanced Placement Essay Questions

Advanced Placement candidates have rather less time than most (forty minutes) to write their commentaries. AP guiding questions therefore tend to be more focused.

PASSAGE 1: from *Maiden Voyage*, Denton Welch

Write an essay analysing the writer's narrative technique and showing how he conveys the intensity and drama of his character's experience.

PASSAGE 2: *Testing the Reality*, Tony Harrison

Show how in this poem the poet uses the central image of the birds to explore the death of his mother and his feelings about it.

PASSAGE 3: from *The Moonstone*, Wilkie Collins

Analyse the narrative techniques of this passage, showing in particular how details of Rosanna's character, situation and state of mind are revealed to the reader.

PASSAGE 4: *My Father's Garden*, David Wagoner

Explain how the physical settings of the poem and its other details give us an insight into the character of the poet's father and commemorate his struggles and achievements.

PASSAGE 5: from *The Way We Live Now*, Anthony Trollope

Show how the central conflict between Marie and her parents is revealed by how they speak and what they say, and by the writer's own comments on both of those things.

PASSAGE 6: *Walter Llywarch*, R S Thomas

Explore the central character's frame of mind, and discuss the methods by which the poet reveals it to us.

PASSAGE 7: from *A Fine Balance*, Rohinton Mistry

Discuss the writer's story-telling technique, showing how he delicately explores the way in which his characters set about working through their problems.

PASSAGE 8: *The Interrogation*, Edwin Muir

Analyse this poem in full, showing how Edwin Muir conveys with great economy the intensity of the captives' experience.

PASSAGE 9: Source Unknown

Show how the style of this passage reflects its high emotion.

PASSAGE 10: from *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, Byron

Discuss this extract in detail, showing how Byron conveys the importance of his topic and the strength of his feelings about it.

PASSAGE 11: from *The Open Boat, A Tale of the Sea*, Stephen Crane

Explore the means by which Stephen Crane engages the reader in this account of ordinary men facing imminent death.

PASSAGE 12: *Heritage*, Dorothea Mackellar

Show how Dorothea Mackellar connects what she experienced as a child with what she knows now as a woman.

PASSAGE 13: from *The Bean Trees*, Barbara Kingsolver

Explore the writer's use of a journey as a symbol of search for meaning and direction in one's life.

PASSAGE 14: from *Free Fall*, William Golding

Analyse the methods Golding uses to present the character of Miss Pringle.

PASSAGE 15: from *Adam Bede*, George Eliot

Write an account of the passage in which you show how the writer builds up an expectation in the reader that the consequences of this meeting will be unfortunate.

PASSAGE 16: from *The Getting of Wisdom*, Henry Handel Richardson

Discuss Laura's effectiveness as an observer, narrator and interpreter of the events in this episode.

PASSAGE 17: *My Father*, James Berry

Give a full account of how in this poem James Berry conveys the power of the conflict both between the characters and within the boy himself.

PASSAGE 18: from *The Good Soldier*, Ford Madox Ford

Show how Ford Madox Ford establishes that his narrator is very fully involved in, and affected by, the story he is telling.

PASSAGE 19: from *A Death in the Family*, James Agee

Show how and to what purpose James Agee uses a variety of writing styles in this passage.

PASSAGE 20: *Entirely*, Louis MacNeice

Analyse this poem, showing how Louis MacNeice makes what is essentially a broad philosophical statement in such a way that it carries meaning and power for us in our everyday lives.

PASSAGE 21: *Hats* from *Except by Nature*, Sandra Alcosser

'Both a celebration and an outcry.' Analyse the passage in detail to show how the writer has made it both of these things.

PASSAGE 22: *The Tourist from Syracuse*, Donald Justice

Write a full account of this poem, showing how the poet works to ensure that we will find reading it a disturbing experience.

PASSAGE 23: *The Voice*, Thomas Hardy

Show how Hardy in this poem conveys a deep sense of loss.

PASSAGE 24: from *The War in Eastern Europe*, John Reed

Explore the means by which the writer of this passage presents war as a casual and futile human activity.

PASSAGE 25: *Adolescence – II*, Rita Dove

Show how the poet captures the delicacy of this moment of balance in a young girl's life.

PASSAGE 26: from *The Feast of Stephen*, Anthony Hecht

Discuss this poetic extract in detail, showing how the poet represents the process of growth from boyhood to young manhood.

PASSAGE 27: from *The Singapore Grip*, J G Farrell

Explore Ehrendorf's response to the events described this passage, showing how he swings between detachment from and involvement with them.

PASSAGE 28: *Gamecock*, James Dickey

Write an essay about this poem in which you explain how it could be seen as a celebration.

PASSAGE 29: from *Oscar and Lucinda*, Peter Carey

Show how Peter Carey explores the relationship between his characters and conveys the sense that they are at a crossroads in it so that this is therefore a very important moment in their lives.

PASSAGE 30: *The Bystander*, Rosemary Dobson

Show how Rosemary Dobson communicates the idea that the great events of history are not recognised as such until after they have happened.

PASSAGE 31: *Musée Des Beaux Arts*, W H Auden

Discuss this poem in detail, showing how Auden conveys the sense that he speaks with authority both about painting and about human suffering.

PASSAGE 32: *Snake*, D H Lawrence

Analyse D H Lawrence's narrative skill in this poem, showing how by his use of detail and by personalising the event he seeks to convey the significance of this encounter.

PASSAGE 33: *The Killer*, Judith Wright

Show how Judith Wright tells this story as a vivid and real event but then at the end of the poem gives the episode a sudden and unexpected symbolic significance.

PASSAGE 34: from *The Catastrophist*, Ronan Bennet

Discuss Ronan Bennet's skill in telling this story and in particular in conveying the horror of the episode.

PASSAGE 35: *Glory Be to God for Dappled Things*, Gerard Manley Hopkins

Show how the twin concepts of 'lists' and 'patterns' are central to both the idea and the style of this poem.

PASSAGE 36: *The Idea of Perfection*, Kate Grenville

Explore this passage, showing how the writer presents a unique view of the place described, through the eyes of her central character.

PASSAGE 37: *Otherwise*, Cilla McQueen

Show how the poet explores the connection between our lives as individuals and the wider setting in which we live them.

PASSAGE 38: from *John Dollar*, Marianne Wiggins

Explore the writer's narrative technique in this passage, showing how she presents the situation very much 'at ground level' – from the perspective of the characters in it.

PASSAGE 39: *Parachute*, Lenrie Peters

Show how the poet recreates a very exact physical experience in words and then seeks to give it a universal significance.

PASSAGE 40: from *Bad Blood*, Lorna Sage

Discuss the methods the writer uses to capture and explore an early childhood experience.

PASSAGE 41: *Two Hands*, Jon Stallworthy

Explore the writer's use of balance and contrast, and other techniques, to express the nature and strength of the inner conflict he feels.

PASSAGE 42: from *The Book of Saladin*, Tariq Ali

Analyse the writer's presentation of his central character (the narrator).

PASSAGE 43: *Summer Solstice, Batticaloa, Sri Lanka*, Marilyn Krysl

Explore the means by which the poet presents this episode as the turning of a corner in her thinking and in her feelings.

PASSAGE 44: from *The Nine Tailors*, Dorothy L Sayers

Discuss the dramatic effects aimed for in this passage.

PASSAGE 45: *Child and Insect*, Robert Druce

Explore the means the writer uses to convey the intensity and significance of the child's experience.

PASSAGE 46: from *Back*, Henry Green

Write a detailed commentary on this passage, showing how the writer conveys the sense that this is a very significant episode in Charley's life.

PASSAGE 47: *Night Wind*, Christopher Dewdney

Analyse this poem fully, showing how the poet succeeds in expressing the significance (both in itself and for him) of the night wind.

PASSAGE 48: from *The Last Puritan*, George Santayana

Show how in this extract the writer works to maintain a balance between narrative and analysis. How well has he succeeded?

PASSAGE 49: *Wild Bees*, James K Baxter

Explore this poem fully, showing how the poet uses a vividly realised episode to illustrate what for him are important truths.

PASSAGE 50: from *Life of Pi*, Yann Martel

Write a detailed commentary on this passage, showing what makes it an unusual and powerful piece of writing.

PASSAGE 51: *Planting a Sequoia*, Dana Gioia

Give a full account of this poem in which you explain how the poet has succeeded in subtly expressing powerful feelings of personal grief while at the same time writing something which has meaning for us all.

PASSAGE 52: from *Postcards*, E Annie Proulx

Analyse the writer's narrative techniques in this passage, explaining what effects she is aiming for and assessing how successful she has been.

PASSAGE 53: *Brainstorm*, Howard Nemerov

Write a full account of this poem, paying careful attention to the way the poet explores the nature and origins of some of Mankind's insecurities.

PASSAGE 54: from *The Loom*, R L Sasaki

Write a full analysis of this passage, showing how the details of the mother's weaving relate to the whole family situation of which she is part.

PASSAGE 55: *The Wasps' Nest*, James L Rosenberg

Explore this poem, showing why it is a good example of poetry's power to reveal the extraordinary significance of ordinary things and events.

Section Eight: Extremely Short Passages for Extremely Quick Practice

It won't be easy to find the blocks of time needed to write full-length practice commentaries, when you're already trying to fit lots of things into your study day (or into what is supposed to be your weekend). So here are some short quotations from a variety of sources (not all of them literary). Whenever you have ten minutes or so to spare, choose one and make notes on it. You'll have done well if you find one interesting thing to say about each – they *are* short – but some will allow you to say more, and we've added notes and questions on a later page in case you're wholly mystified by any of them.

Can the **SCASI** system still help you? Perhaps – but you will need to substitute 'Situation' for 'Action'. Here's a set of quick **SCASI**-type questions for you to apply to each quotation (there'll often be no certain answer to give, however, and you'll find yourself mainly writing about style – which is probably what you feel you need most practice in doing anyway):

- S: Is there a place?
- C: Who's involved?
- A: What's the situation? (i.e. 'What if anything is going on?')
- S: What's interesting about the words and the way they're arranged?
- I: Is there an idea (either stated or underlying) or topic?

Alternatively, just enjoy the quotations for their own sake.

A

The lights burn low in the barber-shop
And the shades are drawn with care
To hide the haughty barbers
Cutting each other's hair.
(*The Tales the Barbers Tell*, Morris Bishop)

B

Proximity was their support; like walls after an earthquake they could fall no further for they had fallen against each other. (*Friends and Relations*, Elizabeth Bowen)

C

Father declared he was going to buy a new plot in the cemetery, a plot all for himself. 'And I'll buy one on a corner,' he added triumphantly, 'where I can get out.' Mother looked at him, startled but admiring, and whispered to me, 'I almost believe he could do it. (*Life with Father*, Clarence Day)

D

Pale Ebenezer thought it wrong to fight
But Roaring Bill (who killed him) thought it right.
(*Epigrams, The Pacifist*, Hilaire Belloc)

E

I love to feel events overlapping each other, crawling over one another like wet crabs in a basket.
(*Balthazar*, Laurence Durrell)

F

There was so much sculpture that I should certainly have missed the indecencies if Major Pomby had not been considerate enough to mention them. (*Hindoo Holiday*, J R Ackerley)

G

I suppose I shall subscribe to hospitals. That's how people seem to give to the poor. I suppose the poor are always sick. They would be, if you think. (*A Family and a Fortune*, Ivy Compton-Burnett)

H

Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious (*Mary Poppins*, R M and R R Sherman)

I

It's going to give me a little *vista* which will be rather exciting, I think! I shall see more sky – which is always desirable. I hope I shall see the horizon – which would be *very jolly!*... Then, I shall have a sense of space – of distance... A little glimpse into the beyond, as it were. (*Showing the Garden*, Ruth Draper)

J

The most formidable headmaster I ever knew was a headmistress... She had X-ray pince-nez and that undivided bust popularised by Queen Mary. I think she was God in drag. (Nancy Banks-Smith in *The Guardian* newspaper)

K

When lovely woman stoops to folly
And finds too late that men betray
What charm can soothe her melancholy?
What art can wash her tears away?
(*Woman*, Oliver Goldsmith, 1728-1774)

L

To be buried in lava and not turn a hair, it is then a man shows what stuff he is made of. To know he can do better next time, unrecognizably better, and that there is no next time, and that it is a blessing there is not, there is a thought to be going on with. (*Malone Dies*, Samuel Beckett)

M

Some have too much, yet still do crave;
I little have, and seek no more.
They are but poor, though much they have,
And I am rich with little store:
They poor, I rich; they beg, I give;
They lack, I leave; they pine, I live.

(*My Mind to Me a Kingdom Is*, Sir Edward Dyer, 1550?-1607)

N

I've danced with a man, who's danced with a girl, who's danced with the Prince of Wales. (*Picnic*, Herbert Farjeon)

O

Who ever heard of a clockwork orange?...The attempt to impose upon man, a creature of growth and capable of sweetness, to ooze juicily at the last round the bearded lips of God, to attempt to impose, I say, laws and conditions appropriate to a mechanical creation, against this I raise my sword-pen. (*The Clockwork Orange*, Anthony Burgess)

P

Between the curtains the autumnal sunlight
With lean and yellow fingers points me out;
The clock moans: Why? Why? Why?

(*Living*, Harold Munro)

Q

The oily water on the river mirrored the red sky, sun sunk on top
of final Frisco peaks, no fish in that stream, no hermit in those
mounts, just ourselves rheumy-eyed and hung-over like old
bums on the river-bank, tired and wily.

(*Sunflower Sutra*, Allen Ginsberg)

R

Sitting as huge as Asia, seismic with laughter,
Gin and chicken helpless in her Irish hand

(*Sonnet to My Mother*, George Barker)

The pages below have been left blank so that this copy of the Handbook remains aligned with the Teaching Copy. You can use them to write out your answers to the above short exercises, if you wish.

Appendix 1: An Extract Back in Context

The Feast of Stephen

I

The coltish horseplay of the locker room,
Moist with the steam of the tiled shower stalls,
With shameless blends of civet, musk and sweat,
Loud with the cap-gun snapping of wet towels
5 Under the steel-ribbed cages of bare bulbs,
In some such setting of thick basement pipes
And janitorial realities
Boys for the first time frankly eye each other,
Inspect each others' bodies at close range,
10 And what they see is not so much another
As a strange, possible version of themselves,
And all the sparring dance, adrenal life,
Tense, jubilant nimbleness, is but a vague,
Busy, unfocused ballet of self-love.

II

15 If the heart has its reasons, perhaps the body
Has its own lumbering sort of carnal spirit,
Felt in the tingling bruises of collision,
And known to captains as esprit de corps.
What is this brisk fraternity of timing,
20 Pivot and lobbing arc, or indirection,
Mens sana in men's sauna, in the flush
Of health and toilets, private and corporal glee,
These fleet caroms, plies and genuflections
Before the salmon-leap, the leaping fountain
25 All sheathed in glistening light, flexed and alert?
From the vast echo-chamber of the gym,
Among the scumbled shouts and shrill of whistles,
The bounced basketball sound of a leather whip.

III

30 Think of those barren places where men gather
To act in the terrible name of rectitude,
Of acned shame, punk's pride, muscle or turf,
The bully's thin superiority.
Think of the Sturm-Abteilungs Kommandant
Who loves Beethoven and collects Degas,
35 Or the blond boys in jeans whose narrowed eyes
Are focussed by some hard and smothered lust,

Who lounge in a studied mimicry of ease,
Flick their live butts into the standing weeds,
And comb their hair in the mirror of cracked windows
40 Of an abandoned warehouse where they keep
In darkened readiness for their occasion
The rope, the chains, handcuffs and gasoline.

IV

Out in the rippled heat of a neighbor's field,
In the kilowatts of noon, they've got one cornered.
45 The bugs are jumping, and the burly youths
Strip to the waist for the hot work ahead.
They go to arm themselves at the dry-stone wall,
Having flung down their wet and salty garments
At the feet of a young man whose name is Saul.
50 He watches sharply these superbly tanned
Figures with a swimmer's chest and shoulders,
A miler's thighs, with their self-conscious grace,
And in between their sleek, converging bodies,
Brilliantly oiled and burnished by the sun,
55 He catches a brief glance of bloodied hair
And hears an unintelligible prayer.

Anthony Hecht

If you enjoyed writing about the opening verse of this poem (given on page 93) you will also be interested to see where it 'goes' in the remaining three verses.

It may help you to know that St Stephen was an early Christian martyr, stoned to death, and that Sturm-Abteilungen were 'brownshirts' (fascists under the command of Hitler). Think about the connection between the setting of the first two verses (which is comparatively modern) and those established in the final two (historically more distant). Now you can perhaps see why when the poem is put together again its parts mean much more.

Final Words

We hope you've found this book useful. It will have worked if it makes you feel more confident as you approach the examination. It will have worked even better if you take away from it a clearer understanding of how good writing is put together. It will have worked best of all if you remember some of the writers you've been exposed to, seek out more of what they've written, and read what you've found not in order to get ready for an exam but just because you want to.

Good luck with the exam, however...

Email us at wordsmith@clix.pt if you need further help or advice – or if you want to make suggestions about either LitWorks.com or *Writing Unseen Commentaries*. We'd be pleased to hear from you.

Acknowledgements

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A source is sought for the following (information gratefully received): PASSAGE 9 (page 39)

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Passages used in past IB exam papers, with date of use

This information may be helpful if you have access to past IB papers. You will be able to order past papers on CD Rom by going to the IBO website: <http://www.ibo.org> > Resources > IB Store.

Introductory Passages

PASSAGE A: from <i>Maiden Voyage</i> , Denton Welch	4	May 96
PASSAGE B: <i>Testing the Reality</i> , Tony Harrison	8	Nov 93

Section One: Standard Level Passages

Part 1: A Focus on Setting

PASSAGE C: from <i>The Moonstone</i> , Wilkie Collins	11	May 00
PASSAGE D: <i>My Father's Garden</i> , David Wagoner	17	Nov 94

Part 2: A Focus on Character

PASSAGE E: from <i>The Way We Live Now</i> , Anthony Trollope	21	May 94
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Part 3: A Focus on Action

PASSAGE G: from <i>A Fine Balance</i> , Rohinton Mistry	33	May 00
PASSAGE H: <i>The Interrogation</i> , Edwin Muir	38	May 95

Part 4: A Focus on Style

PASSAGE J from <i>Childe Harold's Pilgrimage</i> , Byron	45	May 98
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Part 5: A Focus on Ideas

PASSAGE K: from <i>The Open Boat, A Tale of the Sea</i> , Stephen Crane	51	May 01
PASSAGE L: <i>Heritage</i> , Dorothea Mackellar	56	May 92

Part 6: Analysis of further passages from IB SL papers

From <i>The Bean Trees</i> , Barbara Kingsolver (<i>Setting</i> : Prose)	60	May 98
<i>The Geranium</i> , Theodore Roethke (<i>Character</i> : Poem)	64	May 90?
From <i>Gorilla, My Love</i> , Toni Cade Bambara (<i>Style</i> : Prose)	67	May 91

Part 8: Writing Your Commentary

PASSAGE O: from <i>The Getting of Wisdom</i> , Henry Handel Richardson	76	Nov 93
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Section Two: Higher Level Passages

PASSAGE C: from <i>The Moonstone</i> , Wilkie Collins	79	May 00
PASSAGE P: <i>My Father</i> , James Berry	84	May 96
PASSAGE Q: from <i>The Good Soldier</i> , Ford Madox Ford	67	Nov 95
PASSAGE R: from <i>A Death in the Family</i> , James Agee	70	Nov 99
PASSAGE S: <i>Entirely</i> , Louis MacNeice	72	May 94

Section Four: How to Compare Passages

PASSAGE A1: <i>The Bystander</i> , Rosemary Dobson	102	Nov 95
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Section Five: More Recent Examination Papers

Standard Level:

PASSAGE 38: <i>The Idea of Perfection</i> , Kate Grenville		May 03
PASSAGE 39: <i>Otherwise</i> , Cilla McQueen		May 03
PASSAGE 40: from <i>John Dollar</i> , Marianne Wiggins		Nov 03
PASSAGE 41: <i>Parachute</i> , Lenrie Peters		Nov 03
PASSAGE 42: from <i>Bad Blood</i> , Lorna Sage		May 04
PASSAGE 43: <i>Two Hands</i> , Jon Stallworthy		May 04
PASSAGE 44: from <i>The Book of Saladin</i> , Tariq Ali		Nov 04
PASSAGE 45: <i>Summer Solstice, Batticaloa, Sri Lanka</i> , Marilyn Krysl		Nov 04
PASSAGE 46: from <i>The Nine Tailors</i> , Dorothy L Sayers		May 05
PASSAGE 47: <i>Child and Insect</i> , Robert Druce		May 05

Higher Level:	
PASSAGE 48: from <i>Back</i> , Henry Green	May 03
PASSAGE 49: <i>Night Wind</i> , Christopher Dewdney	May 03
PASSAGE 50: from <i>The Last Puritan</i> , George Santayana	Nov 03
PASSAGE 51: <i>Wild Bees</i> , James K Baxter	Nov 03
PASSAGE 52: from <i>Life of Pi</i> , Yann Martel	May 04
PASSAGE 53: <i>Planting a Sequoia</i> , Dana Gioia	May 04
PASSAGE 54: from <i>Postcards</i> , E Annie Proulx	Nov 04
PASSAGE 55: <i>Brainstorm</i> , Howard Nemerov	Nov 04
PASSAGE 56: from <i>The Loom</i> , R L Sasaki	May 05
PASSAGE 57: <i>The Wasps' Nest</i> , James L Rosenberg	May 05