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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? (*At what point in the season was the match played? Did the venue favour one side? What was the weather like? 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 account of the way the game was played by each team.*) We might call that the **Style** of what we saw.
- 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, and at least one piece of drama, 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 on from there to the independent practice passages (Section Three).

If however you want to take things further you can work through Section Two (**Higher Level – Literature** 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 literary 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 Sections Three, Four and Five 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 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 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 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. 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 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 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.

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.

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 could climb up to it in any way. I knew that I could not.

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?

Box 1.1 in the Answers Booklet

- a) Young people used to stay there, but haven't done so for some time: the house is no longer set up for a young (and adventurous) visitor.
- b) They represent the regimentation and European orderliness that the boy wants to escape from.
- c) The grass is '*tall*' (maybe difficult to see over, and someone could be hiding in it) and '*rank*' (which can mean both wild and evil-smelling); it is growing in the '*shadow*' of the wall (and therefore darker than the sunlit countryside around); and the fact that it is '*sharp as knives*' makes it seem dangerous. It resists him, so that he has to push through it. The connection with *line 17* is in the phrase '*harsh spears of grass*' in that line.
- d) It reminds us of the severed head, around which flies were also buzzing; it might suggest that the flies have pursued him here; and the fact that the insects are banging into the wall as if they want to get through it emphasises the fact that he too is trapped outside the city.

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?

1.2

- a) The second. The first one tells us how he likes to be thought of (as independent); the second one reveals that he really just prefers to get his own way.
- b) '*fiercely*' and '*brooding*'. You could also argue that the phrase '*for all I could see*' is sarcastic.
- c) '*quickly*'

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?

1.3

- a) The boy is in an alien environment '*here*', in China; but the '*European villa*' itself is unwelcoming; Mr. Butler's attitude is restrictive; the boy is rebellious by nature; and in any case he badly wants to explore the area. Something's got to give!
- b) It takes the boy some time to reach the '*black speck*' in the road. As he walks he speculates about what it might be. The '*haze*' of flies suggests that it may be something decaying. The flies rise and are now described as '*loathsome*', and that word taken together with the pinkness of the object just revealed suggests that something horrible is lying there. Then in lines *27* and *28* the writer describes the boy's physical reaction, but he makes us wait until the next paragraph before telling us what it is that the boy has seen. The timing of all of that is carefully controlled.

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?

1.4

- a) The landscape is in a state of '*torpor*' (as if it feels sleepy); the bushes emit sounds like harsh human speech (they '*squeaked and grated linguistically*'); the dust and sand behave as if they can control their movements ('*eddy and swirl themselves into flat sheets*'); and the grass is like '*spears*' which '*stuck up through the sand*' (also as if they were doing it of their own volition, as an act of aggression).
- b) Colour
- c) They're short, indicating the speed at which things are happening.

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

1.5

All of them. We should possibly call them themes rather than ideas (we'll talk later about the difference between the two).

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*.