

Paper 1 – Example Prose Commentary

Higher Level

May 2008

The first two words of the extract 'At last' suggest a long, possibly difficult journey to the place where the protagonist, our narrator, now stands. The author uses first person narration to good effect, it allows the reader to feel as though the narrator is speaking directly to them. The constant use of the word 'I' allows the reader to empathise with the narrator directly. And the narrator even addresses the reader personally saying 'It wasn't the dark I was afraid of, you understand.' Again the use of the contraction 'wasn't' adds to the colloquial, personal and informal feel of the narration and shortens the distance between the narrator and the reader. It is as though he narrator was a friend relating his past experience to us.

Comment [KH1]: Clear introduction that jumps straight into analysis

Comment [KH2]: Good exploration of some of the more subtle literary features

Comment [KH3]: Good variety of features considered right from the start

Comment [KH4]: Constant and clear reference to the effect on the reader

Comment [KH5]: Probably unnecessary

There is very vivid and detailed descriptive language used in this extract. The imagery employed and the details revealed add to the creation of a foreboding and mysterious mood and setting. The first two sentences of the extract reveal the location of the narrator at the 'crossroads' where he has 'to turn left under the beech trees.' It is night, as he expects to see lights' from 'Ransom's windows' or it might be very late 'past black out time'. The reader gets the idea that the narrator is on a journey to travel to 'Ransom's' house. The first question that comes to mind is why is the narrator travelling at night? Surely there is a reason for his secretive behaviour. This adds to the tension and mystery in this text. The very name of the character is to visit, 'Ransom', is sinister as the word has connotations that are unpleasantly linked to kidnapping, fear, bondage and a threat to life. The narrator's 'watch had stopped' and thus he cannot tell the time, this detail makes the reader feel that the narrator is even more without control in this situation. The narrator is practically helpless and has no power over what could happen at any moment. The uncertainty of the narrator with regards to the constant questioning and surmising such as in 'or was it past black out time?' and 'it was dark enough but that might be due to the fog and tress,' add to the foreboding and sinister atmosphere of this text.

Comment [KH6]: Clear topic sentence

Comment [KH7]: Perhaps a little obvious and the 'gets' makes it quite informal

Comment [KH8]: Better focus back on the effect created

Comment [KH9]: Clear link back to the overall point of this paragraph

Comment [KH10]: Each paragraph explores a clearly different organizing principle

Comment [KH11]: Again the focus is on some of the more subtle features – note that these are the ones that are particularly relevant to prose

There is a running theme of darkness and the fear of insanity that is seen throughout the extract. As we shall see later, this builds up the characterization of the narrator as well as raises the level of tension and excitement in the extract. The reader is invited to sympathise with the narrator as he says 'We have all known times when inanimate objects seemed to have almost a facial expression.' This can be classified as an indirect use of personification as the trees and roads seem to be showing an unpleasant expression. The author then employs the use of dialogue to show the thoughts of the narrator, with an interesting use of a double-negative in the sentence. This adds to the ambiguity of meaning and amplifies the theme of insanity and the fear of insanity as we, the readers, are confused by what the narrator means. We now have some doubts of the clarity of his mind too. 'It's not true ... that people who are really going mad never think they're going mad,' is not phrased as a rhetorical question as would typically be expected but rather as a statement. Does the double-negative imply that 'it is true that people are really going mad think they're going mad? This doubt is thus raised in the reader's minds.

Comment [KH12]: Good personal evaluation to show personal engagement

Comment [KH13]: Good exploration of the use of ambiguity and the effect on the reader

The next sentence is a question that builds on to the effect of the double-negative sentence, suggesting 'real insanity' might start in the place where the narrator was. The description of the beech trees is striking as the word 'black' used in 'the black enmity of the dripping trees' has a double meaning. 'Black' refers to the darkness that physically enshrouds the area and also could refer to an evil, malicious motive. This 'black enmity' suggests an external anger directed against

Comment [KH14]: Generally the language is clear but there are some slight informalities or clumsiness that would bring the language grade down

Comment [KH15]: Again, good exploration of multiple interpretations

the narrator and emphasises his powerlessness, with restricted vision due to darkness and fog and the large number of uncertainties he is grappling with in his mind. He even questions his own sanity! This image is made even more effective by the description of 'the dripping trees' which describe how the branches and leaves of the beech trees hang limply in the darkness but also suggest a wetness and coldness as there might be some dew or rain droplets dropping from the leaves. Or perhaps an even more sinister association can be drawn to dripping blood, which is suggested in a gentle, indirect way. The additional repetition of the words 'terror' and 'horrible' add to the effect of fear and suspense. The use of words like 'hallucination', 'illusion' and the ghostlike 'spectre' add to the theme of 'the further terror of madness itself.' The reader then questions the extent to which the 'horrible expectancy' and 'horrible [surmises]' are real. Is the narrator imagining these things or are they truly taking place? C.S. Lewis has thus far been very effective at leading the reader to think of these questions. The rambling nature of the narration and the very long last sentence from line 9 to 12 enhances the uncertainty and theme of insanity and fear so far.

Comment [KH16]: Ideas developed in some depth with personal evaluations integrated throughout

Comment [KH17]: The candidate demonstrates a clear sensitivity to the subtle nuances of the text

Comment [KH18]: Ideas developed within each paragraph in clear depth and detail

Comment [KH19]: Once again – nice, subtle, unusual, high level literary feature

It may well be that the narrator is not going insane, but rather that this rambling and lack of coherence is due to his 'state of mind' and the fear and darkness that bounds. It would be natural to be afraid when walking alone on a foreign path in a dark forest. The author employs short sentences at the start of the next paragraph 'Surely it was the cottage. It was very well blacked-out,' stating in a matter-of-fact way the observations of the narrator. This is followed by two longer sentences about the 'childish whining thought[s]' that 'arose in [his] mind.' The repetition of 'Perhaps he ...' in the following three sentences with various possibilities of what might happen serves to make the character of Ransom seem more ghoulish and terrifying and the narrator seem more youthful, small and insecure. The narrator lacks the confidence and rationality normally associated with someone who is a mature adult, and this coupled with the use of the words 'childish' and 'whining' suggests that he is actually rather youthful, perhaps in his teens. The ending of the paragraph with the use of ellipsis is effective as it leaves the reader to imagine what the 'face that was not human at all ...' looked like. This is very visual use of language that is very cinematic in nature.

Comment [KH20]: Good consideration of alternative interpretations

Comment [KH21]: Nice structural contrasts picked out – demonstrating an ability to explore the simple (e.g. repetition) as well as the more complex kinds of literary features

Comment [KH22]: Although there is not much vocabulary that is very sophisticated there are occasional words that stand out

Comment [KH23]: The effect of this could have been explored more convincingly

The beginning of the next paragraph further confirms the youthfulness of the narrator. There is a break in the narrative time structure as the narrator says 'I have naturally no wish to enlarge on this phase of my story ... I would have passed over it if I did not think that some account of it was necessary ...' We are no longer in the 'present' action of the plot but rather at some future time where the narrator, who is possibly now older, more rational and a little embarrassed of his past behaviour is recollecting this event in retrospect. The use of italics 'was' in line 16 and 'can't' in line 22 further emphasises the intensity of the narrator's convictions at those points in time. Also, the narrator refers to the 'state of mind' he was in as one 'which he looks back on with humiliation.' This suggests that the narrator could be male as there tends to be social pressure for boys to be 'masculine' by being brave, rational, courageous and confident whereas it would be more acceptable for a female to be afraid and squeamish. His earlier statement about 'it wasn't the dark I was afraid of, you understand' also suggests that he was trying to save his reputation and rescue some of his pride.

Comment [KH24]: Development of ideas – a real sense that a coherent argument is being developed

Comment [KH25]: Another wonderfully complex, subtle and high level literary feature

Comment [KH26]: Good understanding of this quite difficult framing of the passage

Comment [KH27]: Appropriately tentative exploration of this idea

Comment [KH28]: Again, some hints at a more sophisticated vocabulary

The sentences from line 23 to 26 are very long and are made up of several clauses. This emphasises the difficulty that the narrator had in bringing himself to walk 'through the gate' and 'up the little path.' His huge emotional obstacles of 'loathing' and 'dismay' formed active forces that 'pulled him back' and formed also an 'invisible wall of resistance.' This use of anthropomorphism is very vivid and apt in this

Comment [KH29]: Again, good structural awareness

Comment [KH30]: Definite moments of informality

case. The description of the narrator being frightened ‘as a harmless spray of hedge touch [his] fact,’ is something readers can easily identify with. The ‘drumming on the door and wringing the handle and shouting...’ is packed with action that shows the desperation of the narrator and suggests the release of the nervous energy that he has been trying to suppress all this while. It is in addition mildly comical and serves also as a high point in the build up of tension. There is a pause as the paragraph ends to build suspense in the reader’s mind. There is also a large contrast with the first sentence of the next paragraph when ‘there was no reply – not a sound except the echo of the sound [he] had been making [himself].’ This ironic contrast adds to the comic element of this scene. Again, this is a very visual event that has cinematic elements by appealing mainly to the senses of sight and hearing. The narrator is afraid and shaking by now, and the use of the having to light a match to read the note exemplifies just how afraid he is. There is a parallel structure in the sentence as he says ‘I discovered how very shaky my hands had become,’ and ‘I realized how dark the evening had grown,’ which draws an effective connection between the highly emotional state of the narrator and the situation around him that has caused his distress.

Comment [KH31]: Again – this could be taken a little further – apt in what way, why?

Comment [KH32]: A good sensitivity to humour is demonstrated here – often this is one of the hardest elements of a text to identify

Comment [KH33]: Again, good awareness of the feature even though the name (bathos in this case) isn’t used

Comment [KH34]: Again, lovely subtle feature

Comment [KH35]: Once again a good personal evaluation

When the narrator reads the note, it could be said to be the climax of the extract as the reader expects some revelation to be made. However, the author’s use of anti-climax at this point, as ‘E.R’ has gone ‘to Cambridge’ is powerful as the following description of ‘the impulse to retreat’ having ‘leaped upon him with a sort of demonic violence’ is then slightly exaggerated and absurd. The narrator does appear to have imagined most of the frightful and sinister threats that lurk in the dark. In line 38, there is use of parentheses to introduce the arguments for going into the house. The narrator does seem afraid of the dark as he says ‘(it was really dark now)’ but the reference to ‘some rag of sanity’ is interesting as we can now see a slightly more rational side to the narrator. All his ramblings about ‘real insanity’ taking hold of him have turned out to be less real than he thought, and more of a ‘hallucination.’ The short sentence ‘I did. And it was,’ contrasts with the complex structure of the previous sentence laying out the arguments for retreating. These short sentences make going into the house and opening the door sound easier than walking down the beech tree lined path again. It also shows the tentativeness with which the narrator gently tried to open the door.

Comment [KH36]: Again, nice subtle features explored here

Through the passage, there is a repetition of the narrator voicing his doubts, ‘I can’t really describe how ...’, ‘Next moment, I hardly know how ...’ this makes the narrative very personal and makes the character of the narrator much more unsure and timid as though the events were just carrying him along. But, the author has made powerful use of the mood, tone, setting and plot of this extract and this is perhaps most evident in the final line where the door slams behind the narrator , effectively closing all exit routes and opening up new possibilities for further plot developments.

Comment [KH37]: Good ending that explores the final lines without the need for a summing up

Marks Awarded:

Understanding of the Text	5	Clear understanding of the text, almost every detail covered with a sensitive appreciation of multiple interpretations and no attempt to force a reading on to the text
Interpretation of the Extract	5	Excellent – this is clearly personal and original work with a good sensitivity to the subtle ironies and moments of humour in the text. References are appropriate and although they could sometimes be analysed in more depth there is enough here to give the top mark
Appreciation of Literary	5	Clear grasp of the effects of literary

Features		features on the reader. Most impressively the candidate does a good job of exploring the use of some of the more complex features such as narrative style, structural contrasts, etc
Presentation	5	Although this response essentially works through the extract in order, there is justification here because of the chronological development of the plot and, despite this, it never becomes a line by line analysis, there is always a greater sense of overview
Language	4	The language is clear at all times but there is a lack of sophistication and some colloquialism at points
	24	Level 7