

Paper 1 – Example Prose Commentary
Standard Level
May 2002

The passage 'Two Feet' by Seamus Deane, is written from a child's perspective as he hides under a table in his parent's house. The location is central to the extract as it conveys to the reader the fear and nervousness that the child is feeling. That 'the plastic tablecloth hung so far down that [the child] could only see their feet' immediately reveals that the boy has found a hiding place, a place that he seems to take comfort in as he does not have to face what is beyond the hideout: the dangers of outside. To the boy, those dangers seem very real and very menacing as they take the shape of lethal diseases and hence the death and loss of a loved one.

Comment [KH1]: Quick, concise start to the commentary – almost straight into the analysis

The reality of these threats is emphasised by the boy's acute observations. No details are overlooked, and already in the first paragraph we can smell the plastic of the tablecloth, hear the voices of the adults and sympathise with the whimpering dog, whose personification is clear from the way that he sense the humans' distress. 'He felt the dread too,' underlines this as well as making the family, including the dog, a unit.

Comment [KH2]: Good grasp of the main intent of this piece

However, the stress accompanying the process of getting the sick girl, Una, to the ambulance inevitably causes a disruption in the lives of the family. The boy is therefore forgotten and neglected in the turbulence and consequently he must face his fears alone.

Comment [KH3]: The analysis here has fallen off and this paragraph has become mostly storytelling.

Attention is drawn to the 'fright' as the boy lists illnesses, 'diphtheria, scarlet fever or scarlatina, rubella, polio, influenza.' The absurdity of his 'loving' the names can create sympathy in the reader for the boy as it is apparent that he is trying to deal with his fear by thinking of 'Italian football players or racing drivers or opera singers.' However, a smiling reader soon cringes as 'disinfected sheet,' 'acidic fragrances,' 'mups,' 'swollen faces' and 'eyes widening and getting lighter as if Helium were pumped into them from her brain' portray the sickness and its ugliness. In line 17 Una's eyes are described as '[shining] with pain and pressure, inflated from the inside.' The inflated quality links to the Helium and Deane thus gives a shape to the pain caused by the throbbing in ones' head. The alliteration of pain and pressure echoes the harshness of the disease through the repetition of p.

Comment [KH4]: Lovely confident reference to the effect on the reader and an awareness of how responses can change and develop as the reader moves through a text

Comment [KH5]: Clear reference to the effect on the reader

Comment [KH6]: Some quick and concise literary features effectively used

The narrator is frightened and this becomes so much more palpable with the story being told in first person singular. Although the narrator never generalizes and makes the fear more universal by addressing the reader, his vulnerability invites the reader to empathise with him.

Comment [KH7]: Good reference to narrative stance

Comment [KH8]: Good awareness of what is missing from the text and how an effect can be created in spite of this

Not only are the ambulance men working hard, but the family in focus appears to be of the working class. Uncle Dan and Uncle Ted had 'identical shows, heavy and rimmed with mud and cement,' and the oiliness and filthiness along with the date, 1948, connote a time and place where people are struggling. The war might be over, but the drabness is not. Given the name 'Seamus,' the extract might portray a rural family in Ireland and, with this in mind, the bog-land and the swampy landscape emphasises the conditions the family must face, including the sorrow of the death of a child. 'Heaven' is therefore a solace. 'She would go to heaven for sure,' the boy states, perhaps echoing the faith of Catholicism. The tone of the passage is with these few words made less mournful, and instead hopeful, although the reader is left with the nagging sensation that the boy is only trying to convince himself and that no such a happy ending is guaranteed.

Comment [KH9]: Beautiful concision and confidence here

Comment [KH10]: However, this seems to be taking things a little too far

Comment [KH11]: Great awareness of the multiple effects that one line can have and of the ambiguity that can exist in texts and be used to create conflicting responses in the reader

The attitude of the narrator is that of one who tries to hide his sadness. It might be superficial in one sense, but it nevertheless calms the reader, as it likely does the boy himself. The rhythm is also smooth and the sentences regular in length except for the one word sentences 'Una' and 'Meningitis' which helps to emphasise the key ideas that are dominating the boys' thoughts. The form hence reflects the tone: it is calm with few deviations. This can, of course, be seen as ironic as the juxtaposition between life and death permeates the entire text.

Comment [KH12]: It is unusual to talk about the rhythm of a prose passage, although it works reasonably well here.

Comment [KH13]: Good sensitivity to this more complex feature

The 'tiny redness in one toecap' and the 'rednesses' on the lino are impossible to avoid, so the child uses euphemisms to approach them and perhaps this is how the child finds his strength as he sits under the table, the presence of feet only making him seem so much smaller.

Comment [KH14]: A good attempt to end without summing up, although the effect of the euphemisms could have been explored more explicitly

Marks Awarded:

Understanding of the Text	5	Clear grasp of the overall message of the text with a sensitivity to some of the ambiguities and multiple interpretations that seem possible
Interpretation of the Extract	4	Generally the candidate does explore the effect created on the reader, although this is not always done as consistently well as it could be.
Appreciation of Literary Features	4	Some good use of both simple literary features (e.g. alliteration) and more complex features (e.g. narrative stance) although the effect on the reader could have been more consistently explored
Presentation	5	There is a clear progression of ideas as we move through the essay. Quotations are included well and ideas developed in depth within paragraphs
Language	5	Although there are very few instances of sophisticated vocabulary phrases such as 'the smiling reader soon cringes' create a real sense of control over written style
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