4 Tackling Paper 1

Objectives
- to develop strategies for tackling Paper 1
- to respond to poems or extracts of prose in the exam
- to use creative writing to develop analytical skills

Part 1: poetry

Up to now, we have explored some important general ideas that influence the way we read and find meaning in any text. Hopefully, we have succeeded in breaking down the operation of critical analysis. If you can understand the way this works, you should then be in a position to develop and fine-tune your responses in a more deliberate, targeted way.

Keeping these things in mind, let’s now turn our attention more fully to the demands of Paper 1.

The first exam paper (which counts for 20 per cent of the final grade) is referred to as ‘guided literary analysis’ at standard level, and ‘literary commentary’ at higher level. The most important thing is that, unlike the individual oral commentary you will deliver for Part 2, the Part 1 exam presents you with texts you will almost certainly not have seen before. You are given the choice of either a poem or extract of prose and in 1.5 hours at standard level and 2 hours at higher level are asked to write an analysis of whichever one you choose.

In the second half of this chapter, we’ll go through some poems and prose extracts, drawing attention to the things you need to remember as you prepare to sit the paper.

Activity

Remembering the advice provided in Chapter 3 on ‘active reading’, annotation as a record of this process and the importance of asking questions, apply the appropriate strategies to the poem ‘Jaguar’.

1 Read through the poem on the next page and record your response to the following areas, as suggested in Chapter 3.
   a Visual appearance on the page.
   b The title.
   c First impressions: what strikes you most immediately?

2 When you have completed your annotations, spend some time thinking about:
   d Read for aspects of content.
   e Read for aspects of style.
   f What questions do you have of the poem?
   - aspects which strike you as more important — which you might seek to foreground in a commentary
   - underlying principles through which you might be able to establish some kind of unifying argument.
Jaguar

The apes yawn and adore their fleas in the sun.  
The parrots shriek as if they were on fire, or strut.  
Like cheap tarts to attract the stroller with the nut.  
Fatigued with indolence, tight and lion

Lie still as the sun. The boa constrictor's coil  
Is a fossil. Cage after cage seems empty, or  
Stinks of sleepers from the breathing straw.  
It might be painted on a nursery wall.

But who runs like the rest past these arrives  
At a cage where the crowd stands, stares, mesmerized,  
As a child at a dream, at a jaguar hurrying enraged  
Through prison darkness after the drills of his eyes

On a short fierce fuse. Not in boredom –  
The eye satisfied to be blind in fire,  
By the bang of blood in the brain deaf the ear –  
He spins from the bars, but there’s no cage to him

More than to the visionary his cell:  
His stride is wildernesses of freedom:  
The world rolls under the long thrust of his heel.  
Over the cage floor the horizons come.

Ted Hughes

Compare the notes you have made in the above activity with these:

- **Subject**: the poem is interested in the exploration of a particular animal, the jaguar, whose power is registered largely through making comparison with other, ‘inferior’ creatures.

- **Important aspects of content:**
  - The opening two stanzas of the poem focus on animals other than the jaguar, which are depicted as lazy, disengaged or conceited. The apes seem to spend their time picking fleas and tiger and lion “Lie still as the sun”, in a passive, nonchalant state. The parrots are compared to “cheap tarts” in their rather desperate attempts to attract the attention of “the stroller with the nut” and the comparison of the boa constrictor’s coil to “a fossil” seems to represent the seemingly empty, shallow existence of all these animals. They seem reduced to a purely biological condition, uninspiring, without energy and without any sense of character.
  - The introduction of the jaguar in stanza three represents a dramatic point of contrast. The crowd is “mesmerized”, compared to “a child at a dream” as the people watch a creature that seems everything the aforementioned animals are not. The phrases “hurrying enraged / Through prison darkness” and “He spins from the bars” convey the jaguar’s
energy and restlessness, as well as providing him with an emotional life in “the drills of his eyes / On a short fierce fuse”. The jaguar is portrayed with a kind of vitality and spirit that the cage it is in almost fails to contain. Hughes writes, “His stride is wildernesses of freedom” and in the line, “The world rolls under the long thrust of his heel” his power is presented such that he seems almost to have dominion over the whole world.

- The poem makes use of the setting of the zoo and its cages, as well as the anonymous human “crowd” to reinforce the individuality of the jaguar. In all respects the creature is set apart. The poem becomes an attempt on the part of the narrator to write himself into the ‘life’ of the jaguar, to imaginatively interact with its physical, almost metaphysical presence. In this way, the poem is both objective description and more subjective, imaginative celebration.

- The language of the poem is rich and detailed. Diction is chosen carefully to communicate the physical characteristics of each creature. Verbs such as “yawn”, “shriek”, “hurrying” and “spins” actively depict the essential character of each animal, and these are reinforced with adjectives such as “breathing”, “fierce” and “blind”. Both human and animal worlds are described in very tangible ways, so that we can feel, hear and see them.

- The structure is regular in its four-line stanzas, and as we move through the poem so we move from one cage to the next until, like the crowd, we are asked to stop in front of the jaguar. Lines are a mixture of end-stopped and run-on so that there is a sense of organization, as well as fluidity in the lines. The speaker comments with an almost scientific precision on what he sees, and yet allows himself moments of more spontaneous expression in response, for instance, to more unpredictable traits of the animals.

- There is a host of literary elements to the poem. Hughes makes use of figurative language and imagery throughout. The “shriek” of the parrots is compared to “fire”, tiger and lion “Lie still as the sun” and the crowd stands “As a child at a dream”. The similes reveal the speaker’s imaginative operation as he seeks to find a language through which to describe these animals. This sense of empathy really takes off when he comes to the jaguar. The “drills of his eyes” in the “prison darkness”, for example, use metaphor to detail the creature’s sinister, determined nature. At the end of the poem, the phrase “Over the cage floor the horizons come” suggests that the cage no longer exists, and the jaguar becomes one with the wilderness. There is considerable visual and aural imagery in the poem’s exploration of the physicality of each animal.

- Other literary features worthy of comment might include the use of features of sound. There is alliteration in the phrases “bang of blood in the brain” and “Stinks of
sleepers”, and assonance in “prison... drills” and “world rolls... long”. These examples each illustrate the way the poem seeks to describe the animals as vividly and as ‘real’ as possible, and thereby once again convey the speaker’s imaginative connection with the creatures.

Finally, the tone of the poem varies as the speaker moves from one animal to the next. Monosyllabic diction in the earlier part of the poem conveys the speaker’s sense of boredom and disinterest in the first group of animals, but by the time he gets to the jaguar the rhythm of the lines picks up and more complex, polysyllabic diction gives expression to the vitality of the jaguar. He seems to regard the animal with wonder and admiration, as well as almost a sense of fear in response to the jaguar’s power and potential. The superlative expressions in the last stanza, where he is “More than” the cell that seeks to contain him, elevate the jaguar’s status to the point where the speaker’s imagination and the jaguar itself are almost united at the end of the poem. It is as if the rest of the world has ceased to exist.

These are just some responses to a number of aspects of the poem. How far did they agree with yours? There are, of course, other things we could talk about but in focusing more on some, rather than others, you are, in effect, starting to construct a reading.

Here are two possible statements of interpretation of the poem ‘Jaguar’:

a This poem elevates the status of the jaguar above all other creatures, including humans. Its central concern is the way the physical characteristics of the creature transcend the constraints of its cell and imaginatively inspire the speaker.

b The poem’s main strength is its use of imagery and figurative diction to communicate the physicality of the animal kingdom. Senses predominate in a poem above all concerned with the operation of animal instinct.

Write two more statements that could be said of this poem, focusing on such things as the most important idea, a fundamental contrast or opposition, a key use of language, and so on.

Let’s now put some of the ideas we have covered into practice and start to consider how to turn these preparatory reading activities into writing about the text.

As noted earlier, standard level and higher level students are faced with a slightly different task in Paper 1, and the notes presented in the following pages take the differences into account. That being said, the essential focus on analytical skills remains the same so, if you are a higher level student, do not think you cannot take heed of the ensuing advice for standard level students on their ‘guided literary analysis’ and, likewise, standard level students may gain a lot from the points made later about ‘structuring a literary commentary’ and deriving a thesis.
The standard level guided literary analysis
At standard level, you will be given two questions on the poem or prose extract. One will tend to focus on matters to do with content and the other form, language or style. Your response will then consist of answers to these two questions, but you do not have to answer them in sequence. As long as answers are presented in your analysis, it is up to you to organize your ideas in the way you see fit.

Refresh your memory of the approach to unseen work that was suggested by our exploration of ‘The Jaguar’ and spend some time annotating a copy of the following poem.

**Activity**

**The Birds**
I'll miss the small birds that come for the sugar you put out and the bread crumbs. They've made the edge of the sea domestic and, as I am, I welcome that. Nights my head seemed twisted with dreams and the sea wash, I let it all come quiet, waking, counting familiar thoughts and objects.
Here to rest, like they say, I best liked walking along the beach past the town till one reached the other one, around the corner of rock and small trees. It was clear, and often empty, and peaceful. Those lovely ungainly pelicans fished there, dropping like rocks, with grace, from the air, headfirst, then sat on the water, letting the pouch of their beaks grow thin again, then swallowing whatever they'd caught. The birds, no matter they're not of our kind, seem most like us here. I want to go where they go, in a way, if a small and common one. I want to ride that air which makes the sea seem down there, not the element in which one thrashes to come up. I love water, I *love* water— but I also love air, and fire.

*Robert Creeley*
Now read through these two questions:

**Question 1:** What is the relationship that the narrator here explores between himself and the landscape?

**Question 2:** How do language, imagery and structure contribute to the poem’s mood?

How would you set about answering these questions? Clearly, the first one is interested in a matter of content – the relationship between the narrator and the landscape, and the second one form and style – the means through which the poem generates atmosphere and mood.

The questions provide you with a way of organizing your points around these two main ideas. You need to think about whether to directly address them and present your analysis as an answer to the two questions more or less in sequence, or whether to write an analysis that includes the answers within it.

Read the following student response and discuss with a partner what you feel are its strengths and weaknesses.

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**Standard level student response**

‘The Birds’, by Robert Creeley, portrays the internal conflict of a character who finds himself torn between two types of setting, one that is known and familiar, and one that is more distant and elusive.

The poem opens with a sense of nostalgia as the anonymous central character recollects the sources of familiarity in his past that had once provided him with comfort and security. His statement that he will “miss the small birds that come” suggests the character’s hesitation in leaving the landscape in which he currently exists and has been accustomed to. Furthermore, his allusion to another figure, referred to merely as “you”, implies that this familiar landscape also embodies some kind of relationship that he is reluctant to abandon. Creeley further develops the idea of his character at a point of transition through imagery of him at “the edge of the sea”, which holds both connotations of an end to his current existence and a sharp turning point in his life. His past experiences, or his past in general, are also at the “edge” of the landscape – they are “domestic” and calm. Irregular syntax of the subsequent line, as the character remembers, “Nights my head seemed twisted / with dreams and the sea wash” that came “quiet, waking” reflects his confused state of mind. The contrast between “quiet” and “waking” evokes a sense of the narrator’s peaceful hopes and ‘dreams’ that are quickly disrupted by the sea wash that brings him back to his harsh reality, prompting him to desperately reminisce and count “familiar thoughts and objects” for comfort.

Creeley then moves into a second kind of landscape through imagery of one of the narrator’s memories. He explores his deep desire to “rest” as he reaches the “edge of the sea”, which represents the transition area between the two settings. Further contributing to this sense of the narrator’s impending transition is his allusion to his memory of “walking along the beach / past the town till one reached / the other one, around the corner / of rock and small trees”. This parallels the author’s intention to leave his current existence in search of a sense of freedom in another realm, one that is “clear, and often empty, and / peaceful”. Creeley’s use of vowel sounds as he depicts the “lovely ungaily / pelicans” that “fished” generates a soothing tone as he takes delight in their simple act of catching fish. And yet there is still a sense of tension; he juxtaposes “dropping / ...rocks” with “grace” in portraying the creatures as both “lovely” and “ungainly”. Similarly, he yearns to go “where they go”, but only in a “small and common way”. Rather than fighting for survival in the sea as an “element / in which one thrashes to come up” in his present landscape, the narrator longs to “ride that air” and be in harmony with the former. In this way he yearns for the idea of entering a landscape that represents freedom, much like the
natural world that the birds thrive in, but he remains
hesitant to leave all that is “domestic” to him.

The tone of the poem is affected considerably by
Creeley’s choice of diction and expression. On the
one hand, he adopts a simple and direct kind of
diction in reference to such ordinary objects as
“sugar” and “bread crumbs”, as well as actions such
as “walking along the beach”. On the other hand,
more abstract expression in phrases like “I let it all
come quiet”, “Nights my head seemed twisted”
and “I want / to ride that air” provide a more
imaginative, emotional dimension to the poem.
The tone therefore varies from moments when he
seems calm and contented to expressions of longing
and a kind of spiritual thirst.

This sense of tension and contrast is also found in
the structure of the poem. At first glance, the
structure appears to be very regular, with three-line
stanzas and lines of roughly equal length, with one
ligne line at the end. However, on closer reading,
the structure of the poem is actually very loose,
with extended use of enjambment. For example,
the first word of one sentence is put at the end of
the first stanza – “They’ve” – and then this sentence
is continued in the next stanza with “made the
edge of the sea domestic”. Examples like these of
cross-stanza enjambment occur regularly throughout
the poem, perhaps reflective of the way the narrator
tries to see nature in terms of his ‘familiar’ world,
as if trying to ‘organize’ it, at the same time as
yearning to be free from that which is regular and
‘known’.

‘The Birds’ concludes with the central character
remaining undecided over which of the two landscapes,
representing freedom and familiarity respectively,
to choose. He presents a paradox alluding to three
conflicting elements – water, air and fire – that serve
as metaphors for the freedom, and passion for which
he yearns. His emotive use of repetition, for instance,
in the statement “I love water, I love water” is seen
to conflict with the separate final line, “but I also
love air, and fire” and so the poem ends on a note
of ambiguity. It is as if he wishes neither to lose
himself in the beauty of the natural world, nor to
remain fully part of the human dimension, but to
engage imaginatively with both.

The examiner will mark your analysis according to four strands of
criteria:

1 Understanding and interpretation.
2 Appreciation of the writer’s choices.
3 Organization.
4 Language.

Marked out of 5 in each, what final mark out of 20 would you award
this candidate? Discuss your reasons with a partner.

**The higher level commentary: providing a sense of structure**

Unlike standard level, higher level extracts are not accompanied with
questions. This means that you can perhaps be a little freer in the way
you construct your analysis and interpretation, but you will have to
think more carefully about how to organize your points.

It is perhaps fair to say that the majority of detailed analyses of extracts
will tend to broadly follow one of two structural principles:

- **The linear approach**: this is a commentary that moves sequentially
  through the extract, analysing its progression in sections. This can
  often work well when there is a very clear sense of development in
  the extract. Your topic statements (the first sentence of each paragraph)
can then center on the points of transition – but, remember, these
may not always occur between stanzas or paragraphs. The danger
with this way of organizing your ideas is falling into re-telling the story. Remember, your job is to analyse and interpret the text, not describe it. 

- **The conceptual:** this is a commentary that divides the extract not into sections of development, but into different aspects of content and different aspects of language. You may find yourself talking about the character of the narrator in paragraph one, her relationship with x in paragraph two and the setting in paragraph three, etc. You may either look at language as you go along in support of your points, or save discussion about language for the later stages of the commentary (generally speaking, however, the essay will usually be driven by points about content, with language in support). This kind of structure will look at the extract more holistically. It is perhaps more challenging than the linear approach, but tends to enable you to show more independent control over your central line of argument, and to develop ideas more coherently as you go along.

This being said, you should not think that there is a formula to guarantee success, and careful thinking for yourself about the best way to structure your essay will be a crucial means through which to demonstrate understanding of the extract or poem, and independent critical ability.

Have a look at the following poem, ‘The Cyclist’. Annotate a copy of the poem carefully in as much detail as you can, using all or some of the strategies suggested in Chapter 3.

**The Cyclist**

Freewheeling down the escarpment past the unpassing horse
Blazoned in chalk the wind he causes in passing
Cools the sweat of his neck, making him one with the sky,
In the heat of the handlebars he grasps the summer
Being a boy and to-day a parenthesis
Between the horizon’s brackets; the main sentence
Waits to be picked up later but these five minutes
Are all to-day and summer. The dragonfly
Rises without take-off, horizontal,
Underlining itself in a sliver of peacock light.

And glaring, glaring white
The horse on the down moves within his brackets,
The grass boils with grasshoppers, a pebble
Scutters from under the wheel and all this country
Is spattered white with boys riding their heat-wave,
Feet on a narrow plank and hair thrown back

And a surf of dust beneath them. Summer, summer –
They chase it with butterfly nets or strike it into the deep
In a little red ball or guile it lathered with cream
Or drink it through closed eyelids; until the bell
Left-right-left gives his forgotten sentence
And reaching the valley the boy must pedal again
Left-right-left but meanwhile
For ten seconds more can move as the horse in the chalk
Moves unbeginningly calmly
Calmly regardless of tenses and final clauses
Calmly unendingly moves.

*Louis MacNiece*

Look through your annotations. What things did you notice? What key features of content, language and style struck you as most significant? What questions did you ask yourself?

Now start thinking about how you might turn your annotations into a plan for an actual commentary:
- What kind of ‘reading’ have you come up with? Does it highlight a particular aspect of content or style? Does it ask from where the poem gains its main strength? Does it focus on a contrast or conflict, or a significant development?
- What kinds of structure might you follow? One that traces the linear development of the poem, or perhaps one that breaks the poem’s features down into concepts?
- Try and put together some kind of plan.

Now read through this commentary.

**Higher level student response**

In ‘The Cyclist’, Louis MacNiece creates an evocative depiction of the fleeting summer days of childhood. This elaborate, perhaps somewhat romanticized account seemingly describes a single cyclist on a summer day. However, MacNiece’s attempt to fully capture the atmosphere of a summer bicycle trip allows him to also explore the various ways in which this isolated incident connects both to the boy described and to more general aspects of human experience.

In the poem’s opening stanza, MacNiece describes the physical details of cycling, referring to the way in which the boy holds the handlebars, the breeze caused by the “passing” of the bicycle, and even the sweat on the boy’s neck. He is not present as constrained or limited in any way, moving so quickly that he can paradoxically pass the “unpassing” horse, and be “Freewheeling” across such a vast expanse that he is at “one” with the all-encompassing sky. Summer becomes a tangible quantity which the boy “grasps” as eagerly as he does the handlebars, imbuing even the description of a mere dragonfly with childlike wonder, as it rises like “peacock light”. In a different sense, however, the boy is also confined; being young, he exists in “parenthesis” between much larger “brackets” and has yet to pick up his role or place in what is to come. This becomes an ongoing metaphor throughout the poem, comparing life to a sentence or story, of which this young boy represents only a few punctuation marks. The fact that this “summer” may last only “five minutes” hints at the fleeting nature of this carefree childhood.

The second stanza broadens the subject to include other young boys. The stanza is primarily atmospheric, although a reference to the horse, too, being contained “within his brackets” suggests that the similar brackets of the first stanza are a more universal affiliation, and the limits they place on the horizon are not unique to this boy. The stanza uses diction with connotations of heat and even anger such as “glaring”, repeated for emphasis, and “boils” as well as sibilance in “grass boils... grasshoppers” to suggest heat and movement. This experience of summer cycling is no longer limited to one child or the group; it is a “wave” of boys that is spreading to cover or engulf “all this country”.
This rapid expansion of the poem’s main subjects, combined with unsettling and even potentially dangerous vocabulary, such as “glaring”, “heat-wave” and “boils” create tension as to what the resolution of all this movement and energy compared to bracketing control will be.

The third stanza returns to the initial references to summer, which is effectively personified. The active verbs throughout this sequence, such as “chase”, “strike” and “gulp” further emphasize the activity of these youths. However, in line 5 of the third stanza, the flowing run-on sentences of the previous stanzas are brought to a halt by the “Left-right-left” order and repetition of a bell. At this point, the “main sentence” that the boy has yet to join is reintroduced, even if it has become almost forgotten. In this case, the tolling of the bell and the return of the “sentence” could refer to an inevitable transition between youth and maturity, despite the apparent desire to “meanwhile” continue “For ten seconds more” on the bicycle of youth. Alternatively, the poem could be making summer analogous to a bicycle ride – when the boy reaches “the valley” at the end, he must resume the “Left-right-left” steady pedalling work of school with all its confusing “tenses and final clauses”. Or the poem could be referring to any kind of brief escape, where “five minutes” become “all to-day and summer” coming to an unfortunate end. The poet’s intention is left ambiguous, perhaps intentionally, by the uncertain ending, where enjambment and the repetition of “Calmly” make it difficult to discern what is so calm.

Although it does not have an obviously clear intended meaning, Louis MacNiece’s ‘The Cyclist’ does capture the atmosphere of summertime recreation in a detailed manner, which leaves tantalizing suggestions, never fully explored, of the range of ideas and activities that the activity of cycling could metaphorically represent.

What are your impressions of this commentary? What are its strengths and weaknesses? It is certainly a commentary with many strengths. The student has engaged effectively with the poem, referring to the text in support of their points, and there is comment on stylistic components as well as aspects of content. Aspects of content include the subject of the cyclist and of cycling itself, the setting of summer and some comment on nature, as well as some analysis of thematic ideas such as the nature of childhood, the concepts of freedom and of time and the fact that the poem is open to multiple interpretations. On the negative side, the commentary doesn’t really delve into the representation of summer in very much depth, commenting on personification but not really saying much about how or why, nor things like the chalk horse – and perhaps there is more to say about such things as the contrasts between movement and stillness in the poem, or the way the atmosphere and mood change as the poem goes on. Also, what, exactly, is meant by “more general aspects of human experience”? A bit vague, isn’t it?

In terms of language and style, there is comment on the central metaphor of writing a sentence and some reference to diction, but not much more. What other things could the student have made reference to? There are quite a few further examples of figurative language (“he grasps the summer”, “in a sliver of peacock light”, “drink it through closed eyelids” for example), there are things to say about the sense imagery, the free-verse structure and what about tone?

What further things would you have brought to the foreground as well as, or in place of, the points in this student’s answer? In this example, the central argument seems to be that there are a number
of ways of reading this poem. Do you agree? Or would you have centralized such things as the key contrast between movement and stillness, what the poem 'says' about summer – or childhood, or even writing, its celebration of freedom and the imagination – as possible lines of interpretation?

**A word on introductions**

Getting introductions right can be one of the hardest but most significant things in your commentary. Partly because it is the first thing the examiner reads, but also because it is the place in which your essay is provided with a clear sense of direction.

Read through the three introductions to commentaries written under exam conditions in response to the poem 'Magician'. What do you think are the strengths and weaknesses of each?

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**Magician**

What matters more than practice is the fact that you, my audience, are pulling for me, want me to pull it off – this next sleight. Now you see it. Something more than whether I succeed's at stake.

This talk is called patter. This is misdirection – how my left hand shows you nothing's in it. Nothing is. I count on your mistake of caring. In my right hand your undoing blooms like cancer.

But I've shown you that already – empty. Most tricks are done before you think they've started – you who value space more than time. The balls, the cards, the coins – they go into the past, not into my pocket.

If I give you anything, be sure it's not important. What I keep keeps me alive – a truth on which your interest hinges. We are like lovers, if you will. Sometimes even if you don't will. Now you don't.

*Gary Miranda*
Introduction 1

'Magician', by Gary Miranda, is a poem in which the mental processes of a magician are being explored immediately before, during and after he has performed a magic trick for an audience. While this task would seem to be quite innocent, Miranda is able to make the task appear quite sinister by setting a tone that evokes both fear and uncertainty in the reader. This is done primarily through the controlling of pace with caesurae and enjambment, and also by Miranda's choice of menacing vocabulary.

Introduction 2

The poem 'Magician' is as clever and deft as the tricks it describes. Through the use of concealed metaphor, combined with terse and logical language, Miranda exposes the human desire to hide from the harsh realities of life and conveys to the reader that people cannot turn to 'magic' for answers - we must discover them for ourselves.

Introduction 3

This poem, 'Magician', by Gary Miranda, focuses on the relationship between a magician and his audience. He compares this relationship to that of 'lovers' and in doing so explores the tension between truth and deception. The first-person narrative is important to the poem as we gain a glimpse into both the public identity of this entertainer, as well as the somewhat disturbing exploration of his private thoughts and feelings.

Although the three introductions are fairly different in nature, the second being quite 'personal' in its reading, the first and third a little more objective, perhaps, they seem nevertheless to include similar things:

- A statement of the subject of the poem and some brief comment on the way the poem develops the subject.
- A reference to one or two key features of language and style.
- A 'signpost' that indicates the direction, the line of argument and/or interpretation the commentary is going to follow.

It would be wrong to suggest that you should always adopt this formula in your approach to writing introductions to commentaries, but at least you now have a sense of the kinds of things which might be considered appropriate.

By now, you will have developed an understanding of some of the ways in which poetry commentaries can be tackled.

Now read and annotate a copy of the following higher level poem:

**Behaviour of Fish in an Egyptian Tea Garden**

As a white stone draws down the fish
she on the seafloor of the afternoon
draw down men's glances and their cruel wish
for love. Slyly red lip on the spoon
Below is a student’s response to the poem ‘Behaviour of Fish in an Egyptian Tea Garden’. Read the essay through and, with a partner, discuss what you think are its strengths and weaknesses.

Keith Douglas’ ‘Behaviour of Fish in an Egyptian Tea Garden’ is a poem describing an extended metaphor comparing a beautiful woman (presumably in an Egyptian tea garden, as suggested by the title) to an attractive white stone and the men who see her to passing fish. The usage of extremely rich, provocative, and highly metaphorical language in this poem enhances the quality and effect of the poem.

The poem opens by setting the scene – it establishes the white stone on the seafloor, the woman in the afternoon who catches men’s attentions. As fish are drawn to a white, luminescent stone, so are men attracted to this woman. It should be noted that the only instance in which a stanza does not end with a period is the first, and the second stanza is a continuation of the description of this woman.

By combining provocative and marine terms and adjectives, Douglas simultaneously transmits the appeal of the woman while maintaining the underwater-like impressions of the poem. Words like “red lip”, “milky”, “sink”, and “carmined” have a connotation of luxurious femininity designed to appeal to men, and the image created by the “Slyly red lip on the spoon” and pronounced by the new stanza which “slips in a morsel of ice-cream” further serves to establish the woman’s sexual appeal. However, Douglas maintains the constant connection to the sea by describing the woman’s hand as a stone with submarine frond-like fingers.

The third stanza sets up the action in this poem; it describes a fish, the first man who “swims out” to watch. This particular “fish” has the least human
characteristics of all the fish described in the poem. This further helps Douglas set him apart as an observer. The following stanzas describe other fish with human traits and actions, or men with fish-like actions and characteristics. The “crustacean old man” who is “clamped to his chair” like a clam or an oyster, the “Captain on leave, a lean dark mackerel”, the “flat-eyed flatfish [who] sucks / on a straw”, and “gallants in shoals [that] swim up and lag... / ...opening a conversation”. Douglas describes all of these other fish with language that creates an active interaction between the woman (the stone) and the men (the fish). The old man sits next to her; the captain turns to look at her; the man sitting in his place is content to stay there sucking on his straw and staring at her; groups of brave young men try to interact with her, “circling and passing near the white attraction”. The close descriptions of the men and the woman and the intertwinen of their descriptions, along with references to marine terms, serve to set up and maintain the aquatic atmosphere throughout the entirety of the poem.

The emphasis placed on the importance of the woman’s action of eating ice-cream is further emphasized in the final stanza, when the ice-cream has been finished. While she is eating, she has a human-like quality which makes her approachable. However, once she has finished, she is more like the non-responsive and non-interactive white stone that is beautiful, but useless. The eating of the ice-cream serves to humanize the woman and to allow the interaction (or attempts at such) between her and the men. Once she has finished the ice-cream, she returns to being a non-interactive, beautiful object that is “useless except to a collector, a rich man”.

It is interesting to see the combination of the appeal of the woman with the marine/aquatic atmosphere of the poem. While Douglas describes human actions, he does so using adjectives and terms used in marine terminology. This serves to have an overall effect of submerged passion, even an almost scientific look at love. The constant maintenance of the aquatic metaphor makes the reader’s ability to connect and empathize with the characters and their interaction within the poem limited. However, perhaps this is the desired effect – a highly artistic way of presenting what might otherwise be considered a mundane situation in order to elevate it, while at the same time preventing emotional attachment to, or empathy with, the characters in the poem.

**Examiner’s comments**

This commentary has much strength, showing reasonable understanding of the poem and some close reference to the text. The candidate has got to grips with the essential extended metaphor of the poem, commenting on the presentation of the woman and the various male admirers, though there is room for more sensitive response to phrases such as “white submarine / fronds” and the student omits to comment on a number of phrases, such as “their cruel wish / for love”. There is a tendency to describe the action, in place of analysis – particularly in the third paragraph, but more interesting interpretive thinking occurs towards the end, particularly in the comment about the use of marine imagery to “have an overall effect of submerged passion, even an almost scientific look at love”. Perhaps it is a shame that they didn’t make more of this line of interpretation, as there is considerably more to say about the issue of the objectification of the woman and the themes of the poem.

In terms of style, comment is made on imagery, diction and metaphor – with some analysis of the effects of literary features. Analysis could also have been made, however, of the structure of the poem, its use of sound and, perhaps most importantly, the ironic tone with its humorous, objective detachment, while at the same time communicating a fairly personal, involved – and arguably also quite serious – attitude towards the action.

The criteria for assessment of Paper 1 are presented at the end of this chapter on pages 74–7. Imagine you are an examiner. What marks would you award this commentary for the different criteria?
Why not have a go at either a guided literary analysis or a commentary on your own. If you are a higher level student, simply ignore the questions.

**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.

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, 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 of great loving, which is all I've ever wanted. The soldiers of both sides probably wanted just this.

*Marilyn Krystl*

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**Question 1:** What attitude towards war is reflected in the poem?

**Question 2:** In what ways and to what effect does the poem use comparison?

**Part 2: prose**

We need to remember, of course, that you also have the option of writing about prose in the exam.

Essentially, the practices we have been discussing are no different with a prose extract. The only key difference that does apply is that poems tend to be complete works, while the prose option will, in all likelihood, be an extract from a longer work.

In analysing prose there is the same expectation of focus on language and style as there is content. However, students often find that exploring the effects of literary features in prose is more challenging than with poetry. Perhaps this is because prose can appear to be less ‘concentrated’ than poetry in this way, or perhaps it feels easier to talk at greater length about matters of content. Whatever the reason, there is just as much to say about how prose writers communicate their ideas – *what* they say – as the writers of poetry.
Let's consider some of the tools prose writers use to generate different kinds of narrative voice:

1. Read through the following five extracts of prose and annotate them on your own.
   a. What different 'voices' have been created?
   b. Which of the above tools are important to the way these voices are created?
   c. How do these voices affect the way we read the content?
   d. Which extract do you like best and why?

2. Swap your ideas with a partner, or in small groups. Do you agree or disagree? What key points of similarity or difference can you find?

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**Extract A** From: *Venice*

It is not altogether an easy city for children to live in. It has no dangerous traffic and few unspeakable rascals; but Venice is inescapably urban, and only lucky children with gardens, or with parents indulgent enough to take them to the distant park, have somewhere green to play. Blithe but pathetic are the groups of urchins to be found entertaining themselves, in hot dry squares or dripping alleyways, with their inexplicable Venetian games - the most popular is governed by the accuracy with which a child can throw the old rubber heel of a shoe, but is so hedged about with subtleties and qualifications that for the life of me I have never been able to master the rules. The State schools of Venice are excellent and lavishly staffed, but they generally occupy tall, dark, overheated buildings, heavily decorated with potted plants. There are no playing fields or yards, and even the mid-morning break (or so my own children
lugubriously assure me) is celebrated indoors, with a biscuit or an orange at a blank brown desk.

Jan Morris

Extract B From: Breath

I hurtle on too long through the pounding submarine mist. End over end in my caul of bubbles until the turbulence is gone and I’m hanging limp in a faint green light while all the heat ebbs from my chest and the life begins to leach out of me. And then a white flash from above. Someone at the surface, swimming down. Someone to pull me up, drag me clear, blow air into me hot as blood. He spears down and stops short and I recognize my own face peering through the gloom, hesitating an arm’s length away, as if uncertain of how to proceed. My own mouth opens. A chain of shining bubbles leaks forth but I do not understand.

Tim Winton

Extract C From: A Small Good Thing

Although they were tired and in anguish, they listened to what the baker had to say. They nodded when the baker began to speak of loneliness, and of the sense of doubt and limitation that had come to him in his middle years. He told them what it was like to be childless all these years. To repeat the days with the ovens endlessly full and endlessly empty. The party food, the celebrations he’d worked over. Icing knuckle-deep. The tiny wedding couples stuck into cakes. Hundreds of them, no, thousands by now. Birthdays. Just imagine all those candles burning. He had a necessary trade. He was a baker. He was glad he wasn’t a florist. It was better to be feeding people. This was a better smell anytime than flowers.

“Smell this,” the baker said, breaking open a dark loaf. “It’s a heavy bread, but rich.” They smelled it, then he had them taste it. It had the taste of molasses and coarse grains. They listened to him. They ate what they could. They swallowed the dark bread. It was like daylight under the fluorescent trays of light. They talked on into the early morning, the high, pale cast of light in the windows, and they did not think of leaving.

Raymond Carver

Extract D From: Spring Day

In the fresh-washed sunlight, the breakfast table is decked and white. It offers itself in flat surrender, tendering tastes, and smells, and colours, and metals, and grains, and the white cloth falls over its side, draped and wide. Wheels of white glitter in the silver coffee-pot, hot and spinning like Catherine-wheels, they whirl, and twirl – and my eyes begin to smart, the little white, dazzling wheels prick them like darts. Placid and peaceful, the rolls of bread spread themselves in the sun to bask. A stack of butter-pats, pyramidal, shout orange through the white, scream, flutter, call: “Yellow! Yellow! Yellow!” Coffee steam rises in a stream, clouds the silver tea-service with mist, and twists up into the sunlight, revolved, involuted, suspiring higher and higher, fluttering in a thin spiral up the high blue sky. A crow flies by and croaks at the coffee steam. The day is new and fair with good smells in the air.

Amy Lowell

Extract E From: Vernon God Little

I sit waiting between the shafts of light from a row of doorways, naked except for my shoes and Thursday’s underwear. Looks like I’m the only one they rounded up so far.
I ain’t in trouble, don’t get me wrong. I didn’t have anything to do with Tuesday. Still, you wouldn’t want to be here today. You’d remember Clarence Somebody, that ole black guy who was on the news last winter. He was the psycho who dozed in this same wooden hall, right on camera. The news said that’s how little he cared about the effects of his crimes. By ‘effects’ I think he meant axe-wounds. Ole Clarence Whoever was shaved clean like an animal, and dressed in the kind of hospital suit that psychos get, with jelly-jar glasses and all, the type of glasses worn by people with mostly gums and no teeth. They built him a zoo cage in court. Then they sentenced him to death.

I just stare at my Nikes. Jordan New Jacks, boy. I’d perk them up with a spit-wipe, but it seems kind of pointless when I’m naked.

D. B. C. Pierre

Now let’s look at a longer prose extract for comment. Once again, thinking back to the advice in Chapter 3 on pages 34-6 about how to tackle unseen extracts, read through the following and record your response in the form of annotations, questions and selection of aspects you regard as most important.

**The Boat**

There are times even now, when I awake at four o’clock in the morning with the terrible fear that I have overslept; when I imagine that my father is waiting for me in the room below the darkened stairs or that the shorebound men are tossing pebbles against my window while blowing their hands and stomping their feet impatiently on the frozen steadfast earth. There are times when I am half out of bed and fumbling for socks and mumbling for words before I realize that I am foolishly alone, that no one waits at the base of the stairs and no boat rides restlessly in the waters by the pier.

At such times only the grey corpses on the overflowing ashtray beside my bed bear witness to the extinction of the latest spark and silently await the crushing out of the most recent of their fellows. And then because I am afraid to be alone with death, I dress rapidly, make a great to-do about clearing my throat, turn on both faucets in the sink and proceed to make loud splashing ineffectual noises. Later I go out and walk the mile to the all-night restaurant.

In the winter it is a very cold walk, and there are often tears in my eyes when I arrive. The waitress usually gives a sympathetic little shiver and says, “Boy, it must be really cold out there; you got tears in your eyes.”

“Yes,” I say, “it sure is; it really is.”

And then the three or four of us who are always in such places at such times make uninteresting little protective chit-chat until the dawn reluctantly arrives. Then I swallow the coffee, which is always bitter, and leave with a great busy rush because by that time I have to worry about being late and whether I have a clean shirt and whether my car will start and about all the other countless things one must worry about when one teaches at a great Midwestern university. And I know then that that day will go by as have all the days of the past ten years, for the call and the voices and the shapes and the boat were not really there in the early morning’s darkness and I have all kinds of comforting reality to prove it. They are only shadows and echoes, the animals a child’s hands make on the wall by lamplight, and the voices from the rain barrel; the cuttings from an old movie made in the black and white of long ago.
I first became conscious of the boat in the same way and at almost the same time that I became aware of the people it supported. My earliest recollection of my father is a view from the floor of gigantic rubber boots and then of being suddenly elevated and having my face pressed against the stubble of his cheek, and of how it tasted of salt and of how he smelled of salt from his red-soled rubber boots to the shaggy whiteness of his hair.

When I was very small, he took me for my first ride in the boat. I rode the half-mile from our house to the wharf on his shoulders and I remember the sound of his rubber boots galumphing along the gravel beach, the tune of the indecent little song he used to sing, and the odour of the salt.

Alistair MacLeod

How did you get on? Look back through your annotations. What kind of reading journey took place?

If you haven’t already done so, try to organize your ideas into categories. What key aspects, for instance, would you nominate for content? Perhaps:

- the presentation of the character of the narrator: his sense of isolation and unease. What is the nature of his experience of identity? Why does he seem afraid, especially of death?
- the narrator’s relationship with his father: how does he experience grief at his loss? What role does his father continue to play in his memory? What do physical details of his father’s appearance tell us about him?
- the setting: there are things to say about the presentation of the seascape and the sense of winter
- the image of the boat: as a motif it seems to carry literal and figurative significance
- the past and the contrast between the past and the present: the narrator’s attitude towards the past seems a little ambiguous. Does he find refuge in recollection or does he want to be free from it? Past and present worlds are presented quite differently.
- important thematic ideas concern the significance of death and the exploration of grief and loss.

What about stylistic concerns? Key components that may have struck you could have included:

- the narrator’s ‘voice’: a first-person narrative, sensitive and reflective
- diction and syntax: varied uses of language and structure. A ‘real’ and honest speaking voice.
- imagery: mixing literal and figurative, incorporating imagery of death. There is a considerable amount of sense imagery.
- the importance of the use of present tense
- the attention to physical detail.
So what is this extract ‘about’?

- The past and identity: the narrator’s attempt to make sense of the difference between child and adult worlds.
- Grief: the extract is concerned with the narrator coming to terms with his father’s death.
- The inter-weaving of past and present; the sense of temporal confusion. What role does the writing of the narrative itself have to play?
- The extract’s general concern with the subject of death.
- Something else.

**What do I write in a conclusion to my commentary?**

Before we look at a student commentary in full, it is worth taking a brief look at conclusions. Earlier in this chapter on pages 60–1, we noted that students often find writing introductions and conclusions quite a challenge and, although it is important not to treat them as all the same, you could consider a number of things that might help.

In the past, you may have been told to treat your conclusion as a summary of your main ideas. While there is an element of truth in this, just to repeat the things you have already said seems rather pointless and repetitive. Try to think of your conclusion as a means to address some of the following:

- In summary, what is the **most important** thing your commentary has attempted to say? For instance, take us back to your basic line of argument: what have you tried to argue in this commentary?
- What has the poem or prose extract in essence suggested about its central subject?
- What do you feel is the **most significant strength** of the poem or prose extract? Is there a key component from which it gains its main effect?
- Does the poem or prose extract have any kind of ‘message’? What does it fundamentally say about human experience or the human condition?
- What’s the **main effect** of the poem or prose extract in terms of the reader?

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**Activity**

Read through the following three concluding paragraphs of a commentary written in response to the poem ‘Magician’ (on page 60). What do you feel are the strengths and weaknesses of each conclusion?

**Conclusion 1**

The poem, ‘Magician’, by Gary Miranda, is one of rising and falling tension as the sinister inner-thoughts of a performing magician are explored. The very clever way in which Miranda associates fear with the magician is highlighted by his use of structuring to affect tone. The excitement created throughout the initial stanza entralls the reader into a poem that at first sight
seems shallow. The depth of the poem is however made clear by the final message presented in the last lines. This message being of the importance of understanding that which is happening around us, not just in the physical world that we can see but also in regard to those important things we cannot always see.

**Conclusion 2**

Ultimately, it is the absence of poetry in ‘Magician’ that makes its message so effective, and shows the reader that God does not exist. Miranda’s deft and adroit language both exposes human weakness and points to where the real answers can be found.

**Conclusion 3**

To conclude, ‘Magician’ ends up being a poem concerned with the nature of human flaws – the willingness of people without power to be manipulated and controlled, and the weakness of those in power who depend on commendations given to them for their sense of security. The apparent simplicity of the language and form of the poem reinforces its basic theme: it is in fact quite a complex work, and so the reader – like the audience – has also been deceived.

**How do examiners assess the commentary?**

Let’s now take a look at a full commentary written by a higher level student under exam conditions. In order to make the most sense of the exercise, tackle the prose extract below yourself first and then compare your annotations with the student’s commentary on pages 71-2.

If you are a standard level student, perhaps you could come up with some questions that would draw attention to the extract’s key features of content and style.

Read through the extract and spend up to 30 minutes making annotations and planning your answer.

**The In-Between World of Vikram Lall**

I felt a tremor in my sister’s arm.

Before us, at the intersection, the mosque stood towering in all its grandeur, outlined in a brilliant series of decorative light bulbs in honour of some celebration; its clock tolled the half hour at ten-thirty. A dog barked somewhere, and in perverse reply came the sound of a bicycle bell. The image of old Mwangi was floating in my mind, of him tending the garden patiently, when suddenly a terrifying, unearthly squeal came from the shadows, followed by a hoot. My sister and I froze in our tracks. Oh God, Oh Rabba, she whispered, digging her fingers into my arm. Out leapt before us six youths, howling like wild dogs, gesturing like demons, mouthing all manner of obscenities; they surrounded us. I took hold of Deepa’s hand and made a dash for it in the direction we had come, only to meet a leering Elvis face, shirt open, pants crotch-tight, wielding a tree branch. I lurched sideways, ran forward, to no avail. We should have screamed, but terror froze our throats. Backwards, sideways, forwards again, and our paths were blocked in a horrifying checkmate and what awaited was only the kill. But then at the intersection appeared a white Mercedes; it turned left onto the main road, swerved left again toward the gate where we stood.
trapped, and the six scampered away into the dark like cockroaches. The man at the wheel was a local millionaire, Mr. Bapu; he rolled down a window and asked us who we were and what was the matter. We explained our predicament, and he told us to spend the night in his house, he would have us driven to the campus the next morning.

There was no doubt in my mind, from the obscenities I had heard – in a mixture of Cutchi and Swahili, that Tanzanian specialty – and the faces I had seen – that buck-toothed horse, the curly-haired half-caste chotara – that our attackers had known me, and most likely seen my sister before. I, a Nairobi Punjabi Hindu, was dating one of their girls; to make matters worse, I had a sister who was going out in the open with an African. When men develop contempt for a woman, the vilest, filthiest language escapes their lips. All night I smarted from those insults. Deepa was close to hysteria and I spent the night in the same room with her.

The next morning Mr. Bapu drove us in his white Mercedes to the campus, but not before a lavish breakfast and a tour of his quite wonderful garden, which he obviously had a hand in tending, though there was an elderly gardener with whom he chatted amiably. Mr. Bapu cut for Deepa a red rose. On the way he hummed a tune, some sort of bhajan, which we could not quite figure out, but it seemed completely out of key and Deepa and I had a job keeping up straight faces.

I realize that my contempt for those nocturnal attackers has not waned a bit; I have called them names, but this is how I have always recalled them and that terror-filled eternity that must actually have been two or three minutes. Mahesh Uncle comes to mind: when we were little he once said to us, in his typical manner, Henh, henh – see how memory makes monkeys out of our enemies, as one of my teachers used to say. And what does it make out of our friends, Uncle? we asked. He said, It gives them a tint of rose, or it saves them in amber – do you know what amber is, children?

Mr. Bapu, whom we never saw again, is preserved in amber.

Moyez Vassanji

Take a moment to look through your annotations and the plan you have sketched for yourself. Think it through and make sure it will work. If you have time, you could even write the commentary out in full.

Now look at this student’s response. As you read, jot down things that you like and don’t like about the way this commentary has been written.

When subjected to the selective nature of memory, traumatic experiences can become black and white in their extremity, making “monkeys out of our enemies” and remembering our friends with “a tint of rose”. In this extract from The In-Between World of Vikram Lall, M. G. Vassanji writes from the narrative perspective of a young “Nairobi Punjabi Hindu” male as his account of a terrifying attempted attack confronts racism and sexism in culturally diverse Tanzania.

The reader is immediately alerted to an apparently tense situation at the start of the extract, as the narrator feels “a tremor in my sister’s arm”. The suspense is left to simmer as the narrator deviates to describe the landscape. The mosque “towering in all its grandeur” suggests that religion is a large part of this culture, although the narrator does not appear to be Muslim as he ponders “some celebration”. His lack of local knowledge and nostalgia for “old Mwangi” suggests that he does not belong to this community – the “campus” that he and his sister return to later reaffirming this.

The dark silence, marred only as “a dog barked” and by the “sound of a bicycle bell”, is broken by
an “unearthly squeal... followed by a hoot”; the unnatural squeal contrasting the animalistic youths as they are “howling like wild dogs” and “gesturing like demons”, although it is clear that the narrator believes them to be responsible for both noises.

Deepa’s whispers of “Oh God, Oh Rabba” echo the confusion of culture which seems so prevalent in this town. The terrifying memory intensifies as the narrator describes “a leering Elvis face, shirt open, pants crotch-tight, wielding a tree branch”. The overtly sexual nature of the boys’ attire seems to threaten Deepa with their power in an obviously masculine society. The atmosphere becomes even more hostile and as the “youths” wield their “tree branch[es]” even nature plays a hostile role. Empathetic and horrified from the graphic descriptions, the reader feels buffeted “backwards, sideways and forwards” with the two victims as they try desperately to avoid their “checkmate”. The “awaited... kill” also uses animal imagery, helping to describe their cruelty and barbaric nature of the attack.

However, a turning point in this extract arrives simultaneously with “a white Mercedes”, the colour white symbolizing a hope to juxtapose with the despair and futility of their “checkmate”. To the narrator, with a newfound confidence and hope, the “wild dogs” and “demons” quickly become “cockroaches”. Their alliterative retreat as the “six scampered” emphasizes their meek and childlike presence in view of authority, this contrasting with their entry as “out leapt before us six youths” – the syntax adding to the suspense and terror of their entry. The narrator’s recollection of Mr Bapu’s civilized and kind questioning “who we were and what was the matter” seems especially heroic after the “howling” and “gesturing” of the youths.

While the narrator realizes that he and his sister have been attacked due to racial differences, “I, a Nairobi Punjabi Hindu, was dating one of their girls; to make matters worse, I had a sister who was going out in the open with an African”, he is not above returning the insults, labelling his attackers “that buck-toothed horse” and “the curly-haired half-caste chotara”. His bitter but also cruel tone suggesting to the reader that this is perhaps not a one-sided victimization, the lack of dialogue in this first-person recount adding to its subjectivity. Sexism also seems to be rife in Tanzania, as the narrator reflects that “when men develop contempt for a woman, the vilest, filthiest language escapes their lips”. This crudity contrasts Mr Bapu’s gentleman-like gesture as he presents Deepa with “a red rose” from his garden. These on-going comparisons between the obviously favoured behaviour of Mr Bapu, representing possibly either the same cultural group as the narrator or simply an objective stance from these cultural clashes, and the attackers aid the narrator in his portrayal of his attackers as completely heinous, animalistic and cruel.

As he reflects, the narrator comes to the conclusion that his “contempt for those nocturnal attackers has not waned a bit” as his horrific and intense imagery and similes describe the way in which he “has always recalled them”. The metaphorically “terror-filled eternity” being much more real and important to him than the literal “two or three minutes” of the attack. However, the narrator does somewhat qualify his feelings, gaining some perspective as Mahesh Uncle’s words come “to mind”: “see how memory makes monkeys out of our enemies”. The narrator does admit the subjectivity and imposed extremity of his memory as “Mr. Bapu... is preserved in amber”. “A tint of rose” and “amber” as a method of preservation being images of the sometimes deceptively good light that our memories place our friends and allies in. The narrator’s hero, Mr Bapu, will always be an entirely good person to the narrator, with his “lavish breakfast” and “wonderful garden”, rather than the man of many faults and many virtues that he in all likelihood is. Similarly, the narrator’s attackers will always be evil and cruel tormentors in this version of this event, their side of the story not recounted for the reader.

Throughout the extract, Vassanji’s young male narrator recounts a particularly horrifying attack due to a clash in cultures and lack of understanding or empathy. His rather selective memory gives the reader a one-sided view, aligning them with him but also making them aware of the different viewpoints from the extract that they are both able to hear; this lack of understanding and communication is possibly one of the underlying reasons for this conflict and the racism and sexism in Tanzania.
Now read the examiner’s comments. Do you agree with the assessment?

Examiner’s comments

This is a well-structured response to the extract that maintains close attention to detail. The opening paragraph is effective, providing an interesting introduction to the key ideas and signposting the direction in which the candidate will eventually go with the argument about memory.

In the essay’s main body, the candidate explores many key aspects of content, including the presentation and role played by physical and social setting, the key characters and their relationships, as well as showing sensitivity to the action of the extract and the creation of tension. There is more to say, however, about the shifts and contrasts in the extract – particularly the portrayal of Mr Bapu in the second half. There are also one or two moments of speculation, when points assume certain things without real justification; the ‘confusion’ of cultural comment is one example. The candidate weaves some thoughtful interpretive comments on the subjects of culture, gender and memory, managing to say interesting things also about the relationship between the ‘selective nature of memory’ and the first-person narrative.

In addition, the candidate comments perceptively on various literary components, including imagery, some uses of sound (‘alliterative retreat’), syntax, tone and narrative voice. There are occasions when more analysis of the effects of these features would be helpful.

Technically, the essay maintains an appropriately analytical register, with some flashes of quite sophisticated writing. The candidate pays close attention to the need for supporting detail, although sometimes quotations are not properly integrated into the lines. The essay is well organized, and shows a sense of development. The candidate shows confidence with analytical writing and, at the same time, allows a sense of independent voice to emerge.

Write an analysis of the following prose extract. Refer to the questions if you are a standard level student, or ignore them and write a commentary if you are a higher level student.

Activity

Star of the Sea

The music of the ship was howling around him. The low whistlings; the tortured rumbles; the wheezy sputters of breeze flowing through it. The clatter of loose wainscoting. The clank of chains. The groaning of boards. The blare of wind. Never before had he felt rain quite like it. It seemed to spew from the clouds, not merely to fall. He watched the wave rise up from a quarter of a mile away. Rolling. Foaming. Rushing. Surging. Beginning to thicken and swell in strength. Now it was a battlement of ink-black water, almost crumpling under its own weight; but still rising, and now roaring. It smashed into the side of the bucking Star, like a punch thrown by an invisible god. He was aware of being flung backwards into the edge of a bench, the dull crack of metal against the base of his spine. The ship creaked violently and pitched into a tilt, downing slowly, almost on to beam ends. A clamour of terrific screams rose up from steerage. A hail of cups and splintering plates. A man’s bellow: ‘Knockdown!'
Knockdown! One of the starboard lifeboats snapped from its bow-chain and swung loose like a mace, shattering through the wall of the wheelhouse.

The boom of the billows striking the prow a second time. A blind of salt lashed him; drenched him through. Waves churning over his body. The slip of his body down the boards towards the water. A shredding skreech of metal on metal. The grind of the engine ripped from the ocean. The ship began to right itself. Snappings of wood filled the air like gunshots. The wall of the klaxon being sounded for clear-all-decks. The man with the club-foot was helping a sailor to grab a woman who was being swept on her back towards the broken rail. She was screaming in terror; grasping; clutching. Somehow they seized her and dragged her below. Hand by hand, gripping the slimy lifering like a mountaineer, Dixon made it back to the First-Class deckhouse.

Two stewards were in the passageway distributing canisters of soup. Passengers were to retire to their quarters immediately. There was no need for concern. The storm would pass. It was entirely to be expected. A matter of the season. The ship could not capsize; it never had in eighty years. The lifebelts were merely a matter of precaution. But the Captain had ordered everyone to remain below. Laura looking pleadingly at him from the end of the corridor; her terrified sons bawling into her skirts. The three of them being grabbed by an angry-faced Merridith and dragged into her cabin like sacks.

'Inside, sir. Inside! Don't come out until you're called.'

He had found dry clothes and eaten all his soup. After an hour, the storm had levelled down a little. The Chief Steward had knocked on his door with a message from the Captain. All passengers were strictly confined for the rest of the day. No exceptions whatsoever were permitted. The hatches were about to be battened down.

Joseph O'Connor

Question 1: What impression is generated of the atmosphere of the storm?

Question 2: How does the author use diction and syntax to create a sense of tension?

Paper 1 assessment criteria: guided literary analysis (standard level)

Criterion A: understanding and interpretation

- How well does the student's interpretation reveal understanding of the thought and feeling of the passage?
- How well are ideas supported by references to the passage?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Marks</th>
<th>Level descriptor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>The work does not reach a standard described by the descriptors below.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>There is very basic understanding of the passage, with mainly irrelevant and/or insignificant interpretation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>There is some understanding of the passage but little attempt at interpretation, with few references to the passage.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>There is adequate understanding of the passage, demonstrated by an interpretation that is mostly supported by references to the passage.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>There is good understanding of the passage, demonstrated by convincing interpretation that is fully supported by references to the passage.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>There is very good understanding of the passage, demonstrated by sustained and convincing interpretation that is supported by well-chosen references to the passage.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Criterion B: appreciation of the writer’s choices**
- To what extent does the analysis show appreciation of how the writer’s choices of language, structure, technique and style shape meaning?

<table>
<thead>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>The work does not reach a standard described by the descriptors below.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>There is virtually no reference to the ways in which language, structure, technique and style shape meaning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>There is some reference to, but no analysis of, the ways in which language, structure, technique and style shape meaning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>There is adequate reference to, and some analysis and appreciation of, the ways in which language, structure, technique and style shape meaning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>There is good analysis and appreciation of the ways in which language, structure, technique and style shape meaning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>There is very good analysis and appreciation of the ways in which language, structure, technique and style shape meaning.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Criterion C: organization**
- How well organized and coherent is the presentation of ideas?

<table>
<thead>
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<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>The work does not reach a standard described by the descriptors below.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Ideas have little organization and virtually no coherence.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Ideas have some organization, but coherence is often lacking.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Ideas are adequately organized, with some coherence.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Ideas are well organized and coherent.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Ideas are effectively organized, with very good coherence.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Criterion D: language**
- How clear, varied and accurate is the language?
- How appropriate is the choice of register, style and terminology?
  (Register refers, in this context, to the student’s use of elements such as vocabulary, tone, sentence structure and terminology appropriate to the task.)

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>The work does not reach a standard described by the descriptors below.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Language is rarely clear and appropriate; there are many errors in grammar, vocabulary and sentence construction, and little sense of register and style.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Language is sometimes clear and carefully chosen; grammar, vocabulary and sentence construction are fairly accurate, although errors and inconsistencies are apparent; the register and style are to some extent appropriate to the task.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Language is clear and carefully chosen, with an adequate degree of accuracy in grammar, vocabulary and sentence construction despite some lapses; register and style are mostly appropriate to the task.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Language is clear and carefully chosen, with a good degree of accuracy in grammar, vocabulary and sentence construction; register and style are consistently appropriate to the task.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Language is very clear, effective, carefully chosen and precise, with a high degree of accuracy in grammar, vocabulary and sentence construction; register and style are effective and appropriate to the task.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Paper 1 assessment criteria: literary commentary (higher level)

Criterion A: understanding and interpretation

- How well does the student's interpretation reveal understanding of the thought and feeling of the passage?
- How well are ideas supported by references to the passage?

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<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>The work does not reach a standard described by the descriptors below.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>There is basic understanding of the passage but virtually no attempt at interpretation and few references to the passage.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>There is some understanding of the passage, with a superficial attempt at interpretation and some appropriate references to the passage.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>There is adequate understanding of the passage, demonstrated by an interpretation that is supported by appropriate references to the passage.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>There is very good understanding of the passage, demonstrated by sustained interpretation supported by well-chosen references to the passage.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>There is excellent understanding of the passage, demonstrated by persuasive interpretation supported by effective references to the passage.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Criterion B: appreciation of the writer's choices

- To what extent does the analysis show appreciation of how the writer's choices of language, structure, technique and style shape meaning?

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<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>The work does not reach a standard described by the descriptors below.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>There are few references to, and no analysis or appreciation of, the ways in which language, structure, technique and style shape meaning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>There is some mention, but little analysis or appreciation, of the ways in which language, structure, technique and style shape meaning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>There is adequate analysis and appreciation of the ways in which language, structure, technique and style shape meaning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>There is very good analysis and appreciation of the ways in which language, structure, technique and style shape meaning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>There is excellent analysis and appreciation of the ways in which language, structure, technique and style shape meaning.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Criterion C: organization and development

- How well organized, coherent and developed is the presentation of ideas?

<table>
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<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>The work does not reach a standard described by the descriptors below.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Ideas have little organization; there may be a superficial structure, but coherence and development are lacking.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Ideas have some organization, with a recognizable structure; coherence and development are often lacking.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Ideas are adequately organized, with a suitable structure; some attention is paid to coherence and development.</td>
</tr>
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<td>Marks</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------</td>
<td>------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Language is rarely clear and appropriate; there are many errors in grammar, vocabulary and sentence construction, and little sense of register and style.</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>Language is sometimes clear and carefully chosen; grammar, vocabulary and sentence construction are fairly accurate, although errors and inconsistencies are apparent; the register and style are to some extent appropriate to the commentary.</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>Language is clear and carefully chosen, with an adequate degree of accuracy in grammar, vocabulary and sentence construction despite some lapses; register and style are mostly appropriate to the commentary.</td>
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<td>Language is clear and carefully chosen, with a good degree of accuracy in grammar, vocabulary and sentence construction; register and style are consistently appropriate to the commentary.</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>Language is very clear, effective, carefully chosen and precise, with a high degree of accuracy in grammar, vocabulary and sentence construction; register and style are effective and appropriate to the commentary.</td>
</tr>
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</table>