

## Reading and Appreciating Prose Commentary

A prose passage may seem easier to read than a poem. The language and meaning are usually more transparent, less dense or concentrated in effect. But what to look for and how to appreciate features is just as hard. Unlike poems, where the whole text is usually provided and you are looking for the whole meaning and effect, prose passages are usually taken from a longer work. However, they will be chosen as having coherence and significance in themselves and this is what you will focus on.

### Literary features in prose: strategies for approaching prose commentary

You will see that there is a certain overlap with the features of poetry, but other features are more important than is typical in poetry, such as the role of the narrator, the point of view, and the chronology. Read the following in conjunction with the discussion in the next two chapters on How to Study Texts and The Examination Essay. The following questions should also help in guiding you to read attentively for all of your assessed components including the oral.

**What is the passage about? What is the focus?** Is it about an event and what that reveals, a decision a character makes, a character's circumstances, or something else? Define this in a sentence or two.

**Who is narrating this passage?** Is there a first person ("I") narrator, or third person (often called omniscient)? You may need to distinguish between the narrator and the author or creator of the narrator. What attitude does the narrator have towards his/her subject? (Look at irony later in this list). How might we describe the tone of narration? What attitude do we seem encouraged to take towards the narrator? (ie: How does the author manipulate his creation, the narrator? *The Horse's Mouth*, provided below is a good example). Is there a shift in narrator or point of view during the passage?

**Is there a central character or group of characters?** What do we learn about him/her/them? How do we learn these things? Through dialogue, description, interior monologue, or other devices?

**How is the passage structured?** Does it fall into distinct sections? What characterises these? What rationale does the structure have? (Different stages of a journey, of an experience, or a thought process, or something else?)

**Is the development chronological?** Is the passage narrated strictly in sequence, or does it look backwards or forwards at any point? Is knowledge withheld and then revealed strategically? (Look at how this is done in the prose commentary following).

**What tensions or oppositions or contrasts are evident?** Within a character? Between characters? Between the external world and a character? In the *Frankenstein* passage below, there is a contrast between the scientist indoors, and the world beyond his window.

**What part does description or setting play?** Does it reflect a character's thoughts and attitudes, provide a contrast to what is happening in the character's mind, create suspense or atmosphere, or something else? What senses does it appeal to?

**What language effects are striking?** Is the diction memorable? Are there patterns of words? Are metaphors and similes or symbols used? What part do they play? Are sound effects prominent at any point? Does the level of language shift, for example from colloquial or slang to a more literary level?

**What tense and mood is used?** Is past, present or another tense employed? To what effect? Is the mood indicative ('You arrive at the station'), interrogative ('Can you buy a ticket?'), imperative ('Step onto the platform')? If so, what impact does this have on a reader?

**Are there particular effects created by punctuation, syntax or sentence structure?** Short or long sentences? Do these reflect what is happening in the narrative?

**Is dialogue used?** Does this provide characterisation? Does it work dramatically, representing 'events' or movement in the plot as in the *Pride and Prejudice* extract in Chapter Two: How to Study Texts? Does it introduce a theme, like marriage?

**If this is the beginning of a work**, how successful do you think it is as such? What characteristics does it establish about the work?

**How are we being invited to read the passage?** With sympathy for the main character? With a critical distance from him/her? Both? This can be related to irony.

**Is irony present?** (ie: a gap between what is said, and how we are intended to take it) This is a very frequent effect in prose. Is the irony *stylistic*, where a statement is made that we are not intended to take at face value (see Chapter Two, *Pride and Prejudice*). Or is it *dramatic*, where the reader is presented with facts that are at odds with the character's understanding of a situation. In other words, with a superior understanding provided by the narrator / author, as in *The Horse's Mouth*, below.

**What kind of effect does the passage have on you?** Does it challenge your ideas? Open you to new perspectives? Engage you by presenting a suspenseful and dramatic situation, or with a character or characters in whom you take an interest?

### **Sample of IB Prose Commentary (Higher Level May 1997): *The Horse's Mouth***

*Work through the passage first for a general effect, then with the above questions in mind, and lastly compare your ideas and plan with the student sample that follows.*

I was walking by the Thames. Half-past morning on an autumn day. Sun in a mist. Like an orange in a fried-fish shop. All bright below. Low tide, dusty water and a crooked bar of straw, chicken boxes, dirt and oil from mud to mud. Like a viper swimming in skim milk. The old serpent, symbol of nature and love.

Five windows light the caverned man; through one he breathes the air.  
Through one he hears music of the spheres; through one can look  
And see small portions of the eternal world.(1)

Such as Thames mud turned into a bank of nine carat gold rough from the fire. They say a chap just out of prison runs into the nearest cover; into some dark little room, like a rabbit put up by a stoat. The sky feels too big for him. But I liked it. I swam in it. I couldn't take my eyes off the clouds, the water, the mud. And I must have been hopping up and down Greenbank Hard for half an hour grinning like a gargoyle, until the wind began to get up my trousers and down my back, and to bring me to myself, as they say. Meaning my liver and lights. (2)

And I perceived that I hadn't time to waste on pleasure. A man of my age has got to get on with the job.

I had two and six left from my prison money. I reckoned that five pounds would set me up with bed, board and working capital. That left four pounds seventeen and sixpence to be won. From friends. But when I went over my friends, I seemed to owe them more than that; more than they could afford.

The sun had crackled into flames at the top; the mist was getting thin in places, you could see the crooked lines of grey, like old cracks under spring ice. Tide on the turn. Snake broken up. Emeralds and sapphires. Water like varnish with bits of gold leaf floating thick and heavy. Gold is the metal of intellect. And all at once the sun burned through in a new place, at the side, and shot out a ray that hit the Eagle and Child (3), next to the motor-boat factory, right on the new signboard.

A sign, I thought. I'll try my old friend Coker. Must start somewhere. Coker, so I heard, was in trouble. But I was in trouble and people in trouble, they say, are more likely to give help to each other than those who aren't. After all, it's not surprising, for people who help each other in trouble are likely soon to be in trouble themselves. And then, they are generally people who enjoy the consolation of other people's troubles. Sympathetic people. Who'd rather see each other's tears, boo-hoo, than the smile of a millionaire, painted in butter on a barber's shave.

Coker kept the public bar at the Eagle. About five foot high and three foot broad. Face like a mule, except the eyes, which are small and blue. Methyated. The Eagle is down on Thames-side and gets some rough ones. But see little Coker run a six-foot pug through the door, by the scruff and the seat, his ears throwing off sparks like new horseshoes. Coker has a small hand, but it feels like hot marbles. Coker has had a hard life. Long-bodied and short-tempered.

There were three chaps hanging around the door for the bar to open, and I asked 'em "Is it true about Coker?" But they were strangers. Come up on an empty gravel barge. They didn't know Coker. Just then I saw her coming along with a string-bag full of knitting and her slippers. Snugs for the snug (4). I smiled and raised my hat, took it right off.

"Hullo, Coker. So here we are again".

"So you're out are you? Thought it was tomorrow".

"I'm out Coker. And glad to see you. I suppose there aren't any letters for me?"

"Have you come to pay me my money", said Coker, with a look that made me step back a pace. "That's all right", I said quickly. "I'll pay you Coker, I couldn't do anything about it while I was inside, could I?"

"As if you ever did. But you won't get any more".

"I wouldn't think of it, Coker".

But Coker was getting fiercer and fiercer. Working herself up. She squared at me as if she meant to give me a knock. And I took another step back.

"What about that lawyer of yours that was bringing a case? You told a lot of people. I should think they'll all want their money back now you're out again.

"You'll get your money back, Coker, with interest".

"Yes, I'm going to", and she put the key in the door. "Four pounds fourteen. I'm going to see about it Wednesday. And you're coming with me; to see that woman who's giving the evidence. And if you're having us on, it looks like another police job."

The three chaps were looking, but what did Coker care. I like Coker. She doesn't give a curse.

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*From Joyce Carey, opening of The Horse's Mouth (5) (the story of an artist, and his adventures both in art and life, told by himself). (1944)*

Footnotes

1. *from 'Europe and Prophecy' 1794, by William Blake, poet and artist*
2. *liver and lights: entrails from lights=lungs(colloquial)*
3. *a Public House= a bar*
4. *snug = small bar for select customers*
5. *the horse's mouth= authentic source of information (proverbial)*