Coastal

Cold April and the neighbor girl
—our plumber's daughter—
comes up the west street

from the harbor carrying,
in a nest she's made
of her pink parka,

a loon. *It's so sick,*
she says when I ask.
Foolish kid,

does she think she can keep
this emissary of air?
Is it trust or illness

that allows the head
—sleek tulip—to bow
on its bent stem

across her arm?
Look at the steady,
quiet eye. She is carrying

the bird back from indifference,
from the coast
of whatever rearrangement

the elements intend,
and the loon allows her.
She is going to call

the Center for Coastal Studies,
and will swaddle the bird
in her petal-bright coat

until they come.
She cradles the wild form.
Stubborn girl.

"Coastal" Commentary: An IB English Exam Paper One example

A child is a child, by definition inexperienced and almost certainly innocent. But a child may have more insight about life than an adult might think. In Mark Doty's "Coastal", a poem about a girl determined to help a sick bird, elements of style are used to contrast a child's perspective with an adult's, a contrast which does not unequivocally privilege the adult one.

To begin, the situation. It is a cold April and the adult speaker sees a girl (she is "the neighbour girl" and "our plumber's daughter") coming up the street from the harbor carrying a sick loon - a water bird – in her pink coat. She is determined to help and protect the bird: she "cradles" it in her arm, "swaddles" it in her coat and firmly intends to call the Centre for Coastal Studies, whom she presumably believes will rehabilitate it.

It is interesting to note the adult speaker's way of describing the girl and this simple situation. The language suggests that he or she thinks the girl ignorant of the essential, non-domestic wildness of the bird's nature: "Foolish kid, does she think she can keep this emissary of air?" An emissary is a representative or ambassador sent on a mission or errand, often to a foreign land. An emissary is normally more stranger than friend to those visited. The diction implies, therefore, that the bird is a visitor from the element of air to whom the land and certainly a girl's coat are foreign. An emissary does not stay: the girl cannot keep and should not expect attachment from this "wild form" she tries to cradle like a girl would her doll or a human mother would her child. The girl may think that the bird wants to be nurtured back to health, may like being held, but the speaker is sceptical: "Is it trust or illness that allows the head – sleek tulip – to bow on its bent stem across her arm?" The loon is said to merely "allow" her to cradle it, as if it is too weak to fight free as it normally would instinctually. "Allow" connotes resignation, not desire. The last line of any poem is especially important to consider, and here the last line again seems to reveal the speaker's critical view of the girl: she is "stubborn" in her foolish attempt to mother this air elemental, this otherness, this wild creature.

A close reading of this poem, however, reveals the author's intention to be more than just to criticize a young person's stubbornly innocent, sentimental view of nature. After all, what is the

girl being stubborn about? Hope. Help. Pity. Caring. She is said to be carrying the bird "back from indifference, from the coast of whatever rearrangement the elements intend": a cold and mechanical description of the emotionless processes that hurt it. But the girl is not cold, and her warmth is rewarded: the loon allows her. Is her ignorance the bird's bliss? The words "girl" and "carrying" both appear twice at the ends of enjambed lines, emphasizing them. She carries, and she cares: she is naturally supportive. And is the girl really so ignorant of nature? Perhaps it is more that, like the creatures in nature, she acts on instinct, and thus is completely expressive of nature - *her own nature* - without enmeshing it in the defeating nets of thought. Indeed, the figurative language in the poem serves to connect the bird and the girl: the loon's sleek head and long neck are compared metaphorically to a tulip on its stem while the girl's pink coat, continuing the flower imagery, is called "petal-bright". That coat is "a nest" for the bird. One possible interpretation is thus that the author intended to subtly undercut the critical adult perspective on the situation that thinks it knows the bird's nature better. Maybe the girl is far closer to the bird, herself bird-like in the uncomplicated expression of her instinct. A child: direct and stubborn like an animal, spontaneous and simple like a flower. In this light, the last line could be re-read as one of grudging admiration proceeding from a more jaded adult: stubborn girl won't give up hope or caring, and refuses to see that some things are past help and best left alone to suffer in the impersonal course of things.

The poem, then, is one with a deep structure of duality. Two perspectives: adult's and child's. Two natures: analytical/cerebral and emotional/instinctual. Humans and animals. Air and land. It is therefore fitting that the title (which at first might seem a bland nod to the setting) is "Coastal" and that coasts come up several times in the poem. A coast is a place where one thing meets a different thing: where opposites come together and blend. A liminal place where one element encounters another and affects it. As the reader takes in the two perspectives offered and in his or her response mixes them and considers them in turn, it becomes clear that the poem itself is indeed coastal.

The act of interpreting a poem is itself a coastal mixing of objective use of textual evidence and subjective interpretation and emotional response. My interpretation of this poem has led me to the conviction that this is short but poignant evocation of a child's wisdom as well as a child's

innocence and inexperience. Look at where our adult relationship with nature in the clever and dispassionately scientific modern world of today has gotten us. Maybe we can learn something from the "foolishness" of children.